

The western republics: Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and the Baltics

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The Soviet west, an arch of non-Russian republics extending from the Gulf of Finland in the north to the Black Sea in the south and separating Russia proper from other European states, came to the attention of scholars during the late 1960s and early 1970s. While Western sovietologists have long studied each individual country in the region – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belorussia/Belarus, Ukraine and Moldavia/Moldova – before the 1960s, they did not think of the Soviet west as an entity. But the region's prominence in the dissident movement during the 1960s suggested that the western fringe of the USSR might become a catalyst of nationalist unrest and, possibly, a channel for the spillover of democratic ideas from Eastern Europe. The region was now seen as a place where the Soviet collapse might begin.

Yet, as North American scholars pioneered the use of the term 'Soviet west', they soon discovered the difficulties of defining this region in economic or social terms – which was at the time considered a clue for understanding nationality perseverance there. In his lead article in the 1975 collection *The Soviet West: Interplay between Nationality and Social Organization*, Ralph S. Clem proposed that the area was characterised by 'high to moderate levels of economic development with relation to other areas of the USSR', but had to qualify this generalisation by excluding the republic of Moldavia, as well as some areas of Ukraine, Belorussia and Lithuania. Of the usual social consequences of economic development, except perhaps for low fertility, neither high educational level nor high urbanisation qualified as defining characteristics of the region. In any case, European Russia displayed similar economic and social trends. In the final analysis, history was the only factor unquestionably uniting the western republics and setting them aside from the rest of the Soviet Union. All had historical ties to other European countries. In the recent past, some had experienced independence, while others were divided

territorially, with some of their territories forming part of another European country.¹

Another contemporary collection, *The Influence of East Europe and the Soviet West on the USSR* (1975), takes a more productive approach to the region as defined more by its past and present links to Eastern Europe than by any sociological criteria. Its editor, Roman Szporluk, suggests in his introduction that the USSR's post-1939 extension westward made the Soviet nationality question much more pressing and sensitive.² In his subsequent work on Western Ukraine, which was incorporated into the Ukrainian republic during 1939–45, Professor Szporluk shows that, owing to the pre-existing high level of national consciousness, the Soviet authorities never managed to fully absorb this area. Western Ukraine remained the mainstay of popular nationalism, later contributing greatly to the disintegration of the USSR.³

Although this argument would not apply to all western republics, it underscores an important factor in their historical development. The vitality of nationalities on the Soviet Union's western fringe was to a considerable degree determined by the successes or difficulties of their pre-Soviet nation-building. The areas that were able to preserve a high level of national consciousness were those where Sovietisation had come late and where during the twentieth century nationalists had had a chance to mobilise the masses for their cause, as was the case especially in the Baltic states and Western Ukraine. In contrast, in countries where an early interruption of nationalist agitation or lack of infrastructure for such work had prevented nationalist mobilisation of the masses, the population's national identities remained frustratingly ambiguous. This was the case in Belorussia, Moldavia and eastern Ukraine.

To be sure, the Soviet state actively interfered in nation-building processes. Scholars have shown that the USSR institutionalised nationality as a form, while attempting to drain it of its content. As a result, it created territorial nations with all the symbols of nationhood but bereft of political sovereignty, although Stalin's successors were to discover the fluid border in modern nationalism between form and content.⁴ The Soviet nativisation programmes during

1 Ralph S. Clem, 'Vitality of the Nationalities in the Soviet West: Background and Implications', in Clem (ed.), *The Soviet West: Interplay between Nationality and Social Organization* (New York: Praeger, 1975), pp. 3–5.

2 Roman Szporluk, 'Introduction', in Szporluk (ed.), *The Influence of East Europe and the Soviet West on the USSR* (New York: Praeger, 1975), p. 10.

3 Roman Szporluk, *Russia, Ukraine, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 2000).

4 Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 25–7; Yuri Slezkine, 'The

the 1920s made nationalities more articulate, and if Stalinist ideologues managed to undo much of what had been achieved at that time, they never questioned the ethnic distinctiveness of non-Russian peoples. During the post-war period, the non-Russians did not make much progress in their nation-building, but managed to preserve many of their previous accomplishments. Thus, especially for the regions that had been incorporated into the USSR during 1939–45, the pre-Soviet experience of nation-building remained a decisive factor in national consolidation.

Nation-building in the age of revolution

The prominent Czech scholar Miroslav Hroch concluded in his study of Europe's non-dominant ethnic groups that these people usually undergo three stages in their national revival – that of academic interest in the nation's history and culture, creation and propagation of modern high culture and political mobilisation.⁵ All the nationalities living on the western borderland of the Russian Empire qualified as Hroch's 'small peoples' because they lacked continuous traditions of statehood, native elites and literature in an indigenous language. However, in the time of total war and global politics, these nations' geopolitical location between Russia and Germany shaped their destinies no less than did the Czech scholar's objective historical criteria.

During the late nineteenth century, Estonians and Latvians were overwhelmingly peasant peoples, albeit with the level of literacy that was one of the highest in Europe – over 90 per cent. (This high level of literacy was due to the spread of the Lutheran faith beginning in the sixteenth century and the Church's adoption of Estonian in its services.) Estonians, whose speech belongs to the Finno-Ugric family of languages and is drastically different from Indo-European languages, in a sense benefited from their cultural isolation. The Russian imperial government encouraged conversion to Orthodoxy but could not enforce serious assimilation of the peasantry. Instead, the centralising efforts of the last two tsars undermined the positions of the Baltic German nobility, the land's traditional ruling caste, while placing no restrictions on the development of Estonian culture, the press and education. The decline of

Soviet Union as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism', *Slavic Review* 53, 2 (1994): 414–52; Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 111–12 and 129–31.

⁵ Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

the Baltic barons' power, combined with rapid industrialisation and urbanisation at the turn of the century, allowed Estonians to challenge the German domination of their cities, including Tallinn, which had become one of the empire's major ports. In 1897, Estonians constituted 67.8 per cent of urbanites in their ethno-linguistic territory.⁶ The Estonian bourgeoisie and Estonian professionals were becoming increasingly prominent in public life and supported national culture, most notably the tradition of all-Estonian song festivals that began in 1869.

The Revolution of 1905 escalated the political and cultural demands of Estonian activists. Moderate loyalists, led by Jaan Tõnisson and the Estonian Progressive People's Party, put forward the demand for autonomy, while radical nationalists, headed by Konstantin Päts, combined this aim with that of overthrowing the tsarist regime. But 1905 also marked the entry on the political scene of Estonian socialism. As the peasants were destroying large manors in the countryside, the Russian and Estonian Social Democratic Workers' Parties were recruiting followers among the working class. The suppression of the revolution undermined the growth of the radical Left, but had little effect on the development of Estonian society and culture.

During the First World War, Estonia remained outside the battle zone and did not suffer wartime destruction. The fall of the tsarist regime in February 1917 led to the renewed demands of autonomy. Following an impressive Estonian demonstration in Petrograd (St Petersburg), the Provisional Government indeed agreed to unite the Estonian ethnic lands into a single province and to allow elections to the provincial assembly. The assembly, known in Estonian as *Maapäev*, was elected in May and represented all the major political parties, including the Bolsheviks. When the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd in November 1917, their leader in Estonia, Viktor Kingissepp, disbanded the *Maapäev* but was unable to establish an efficient administration. More important, the Bolsheviks alienated many Estonians with their attacks on the Lutheran Church and failure to divide large landed estates.

On 24 February 1918, as the German army was marching into Estonia, the underground representatives of the *Maapäev* proclaimed the country's independence. During the occupation, which lasted until late November 1918, the German military and the local Baltic Germans openly considered Estonia's incorporation into Germany. But as Germany surrendered to the Allies and withdrew its troops from Eastern Europe, Estonia became the scene of a civil

⁶ Toivo U. Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1991), 73.

war among the Bolsheviks, the Baltic Germans and the provisional Estonian government, which was covertly supported by Finland and the Entente. To complicate matters further, the Allies forced the Estonian authorities to accept on their territory White Russian troops, which in 1919 used Estonia as a springboard in their unsuccessful attacks on Petrograd.⁷ In February 1920, the war ended with the Tartu Peace Treaty, by which Soviet Russia recognised Estonia's independence.

Estonia's southern neighbours, the Latvians, although speakers of a distinct Baltic language belonging to the Indo-European family, shared with Estonians many of their twentieth-century historical experiences. Also a Lutheran, mainly peasant people with a high level of literacy, Latvians ended the German domination of their cities during the industrial spurt of the 1880s–1910s. The formerly German city of Riga emerged not only as a major port and a Baltic metropolis, but also as a Latvian city, with Latvians becoming its largest ethnic group (39.6 per cent in 1913).⁸ Still, unlike in Estonia, the Baltic Germans remained firmly in control of municipal government, and their large estates dominated the rural economy. This led to growing frustration among Latvians. While national culture generally developed freely, the plight of the landless peasantry led radical Latvian intellectuals to an exploration of Marxism. In 1904, the Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party came into existence and soon boasted an impressive 10,000 members. In contrast to the Estonian party, Latvian Social Democrats continued to exist after the revolution and subsequently entered into an affiliation with the Bolsheviks. The year 1905 galvanised more moderate nationalists as well, but the greatest literary figure of the Latvian cultural revival, the poet Jānis Rainis, symbolised the intelligentsia's embrace of socialism.

The trials of the First World War only increased the sway of political radicalism in Latvia. Unlike Estonia, the country was devastated by warfare, evacuation and the refugee crisis. Aiming to take advantage of the Latvians' traditional hatred of their German masters, the Russian government created separate units of Latvian infantry, known as *strēlnieki* or, in Russian, *Latyshskie strelki* (Latvian sharpshooters). By 1917, the Latvian units were 30,000 strong and, like most of the Russian army, completely demoralised. The Bolsheviks were able to gain mass support among the *strēlnieki*, many of whom would later move to Russia as Lenin's most trusted guards. The collapse of the monarchy briefly

7 Rein Taagepera, *Estonia: Return to Independence* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993), p. 46.

8 Andrejs Plakans, *The Latvians: A Short History* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1995), p. 108.

brought to prominence Latvian moderate nationalists, represented politically by Kārlis Ulmanis and the Agrarian Union, but the Left soon regained the initiative. During the November elections to the All-Russian Constituent Assembly, the Bolsheviks, who were led by Pēteris Stučka, won in Latvia an impressive 71.9 per cent.

Nevertheless, following Soviet Russia's diplomatic concessions at Brest-Litovsk, the German forces in February 1918 occupied all of Latvia. After the German capitulation, representatives of most Latvian political parties met secretly in Riga on 18 November 1918 and proclaimed the Republic of Latvia with Ulmanis as prime minister of its provisional government. It soon transpired that the victorious Entente wanted to perpetuate the German occupation as protection against the Bolsheviks, who from December 1918 to May 1919 again controlled a considerable part of Latvian territory. In the ensuing civil war, Latvian nationalists relied on support consecutively from Germany, the Entente and Poland to defeat the Bolsheviks, White Russians and the Baltic German forces. The war ended in early 1920, and in August, Soviet Russia recognised Latvia as an independent state.

Further south, Roman Catholic Lithuanians could not boast the same level of literacy and social organisation. Closely related to Latvians by language, their modern history was, however, shaped by Polish political domination and the Polonisation of native elites. Unlike their two Baltic neighbours, the Lithuanians could claim to be the heirs of a mighty medieval state, the grand duchy of Lithuania, but the tsarist assimilationist drive greatly hindered the development of their modern high culture. Seeking to separate the peasantry from the rebellious Polish nobility in the region, the government outlawed the use of the Roman alphabet and imposed on Lithuanians the Russian educational system. Equally important, in contrast to Estonia and Latvia, at the turn of the century Lithuania remained an agrarian backwater. Landless peasants did not have an option of becoming industrial workers, and Vilnius remained the only big city in the area, a multinational metropolis that Lithuanians, Poles, Belorussians and Jews all claimed as their cultural centre.

After a slow start, the national movement spurted during the Revolution of 1905, when a national congress, the so-called Great Diet of Vilnius, demanded autonomy and political freedom. Although Social Democrats had long been influential in Lithuania, new opportunities for cultural expression channelled the revolutionary events there more in the direction of national liberation. Such a trend suited the Germans, who occupied all of Lithuania early during the First World War and eventually modified plans for annexation towards the creation of a puppet Lithuanian government. However, when the German

military allowed the formation of a Lithuanian national assembly or *Taryba*, in September 1917, this body proved less than obedient. It did proclaim independence 'in alliance with the German Reich' (11 December 1917), but immediately pressed for more rights and subsequently issued another declaration of independence without mention of the Germans (16 February 1918).⁹ At one point in 1918, the balance of military powers forced the *Taryba* to accept the German Prince Wilhelm of Urach as a Lithuanian king, but the Lithuanian nationalists, led by Antanas Smetona, gradually took over the administration. Following the German capitulation, Lithuanian forces managed to fight off the Bolsheviks and the Whites, yet lost Vilnius to the new Polish state.

Belorussians represented in the extreme the same case of belated national development and German manipulation. Numbering some 5.5 million in 1897, they were an East Slavic nationality close to Russians in language and Orthodox religion. With their cities dominated by Poles, Jews and Russians, the overwhelming majority of Belorussians were illiterate peasants unfamiliar with the modern notion of national identity. Although it distrusted the Polish gentry in the area, the Russian government did not encourage the development of Belorussian culture. On the contrary, it repressed book publishing in Belorussian, and, when it provided the peasants with any education at all, it was in Russian. With less than 3 per cent of them residing in cities and towns, Belorussians were quite possibly the least urbanised people in Europe. Their national awakening began late, the idea of a separate Belorussian nationality emerging only in the 1890s in the work of the poet Francišak Bahuševič. As other nations of the region were entering the mass mobilisation stage, Belorussians during 1906–15 were undergoing a belated literary revival, which was made possible by the temporary softening of restrictions on the Belorussian language. Belorussian cultural life of this period centred around the weekly *Naša niva* (Our Cornfield) edited by the brothers Ivan and Anton Luckievič.¹⁰

The First World War brought destruction and population dislocation on Belorussian soil. By the time of the February Revolution, half of Belorussian territory was occupied by the Germans, but in the other half, patriotic activists managed in December to convene the All-Belorussian Congress, only to have it disbanded by the Bolsheviks. By the terms of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, Belorussia was divided between Germany and Soviet Russia. The former allowed the local nationalists to proclaim the Belorussian Democratic Republic (9 March

⁹ John Hiden and Patrick Salmon, *The Baltic Nations and Europe: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Twentieth Century*, rev. edn (London: Longman, 1994), pp. 28–9.

¹⁰ Jan Zaprudnik, *Belarus: At a Crossroads in History* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993), p. 64.

1918), while the latter created the Belorussian Soviet Republic (1 January 1919). Subsequently, Belorussia became a prize in the Polish–Soviet War, which ended with the final incorporation of western Belorussia into Poland and the re-establishment of the Belorussian SSR.

Belorussia's neighbour to the south, Ukraine, presented a more complex case. Eastern or Dnieper Ukraine, which was part of the Russian Empire, shared many characteristics with Lithuania and Belorussia. A large nation of some 22 million people in 1897, Ukrainians spoke an East Slavic language closely related to Russian and were overwhelmingly Orthodox. The imperial government imposed harsh restrictions on the development of their national culture, but the national revival that had begun in the mid-nineteenth century was unstoppable. By the early twentieth century, the Ukrainian intelligentsia boasted developed literary, theatrical and musical traditions. Still, nationalist agitators did not have free access to the peasant masses, which remained largely illiterate. Cities, including Kiev, changed their Polish cultural character to Russian because the peasants who moved there or joined the industrial workforce adopted Russian identity. The new working class responded better to agitation by Russian socialists, and, indeed, all-Russian socialist parties had an impressive following in eastern Ukraine. Only the Revolution of 1905 enabled Ukrainian activists to publish their first daily newspaper, *Rada* (Council), and to start popular education societies in the countryside – concessions that the government would take back by the beginning of the war. Except for a brief period after 1905, political parties could only operate underground, and only socialist Ukrainian parties could muster any significant support.

Western Ukraine, which was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, had a very different historical experience. Numbering 3.5 million in 1910, Ukrainians in East Galicia (with its centre in Lemberg (L'viv)) suffered from Polish dominion in the crown land of Galicia but benefited from education in their native tongue, freedom of cultural development and – however limited – the experience of political participation. Downsides included the lack of industrial development in the region and Polish and Jewish control of the cities. The national movement began in the mid-nineteenth century and, in time, greatly benefited from Ukrainian identification with the Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church that clearly set Ukrainians apart from the Poles. By the turn of the century, a massive network of Ukrainian printed media, co-operatives, reading rooms and cultural societies produced a generation of nationally conscious peasants.¹¹ Intellectuals, meanwhile, finally established that their people were

¹¹ John-Paul Himka, *Galician Villagers and the Ukrainian National Movement in the Nineteenth Century* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1988).

not just 'Ruthenians', but a part of a larger Ukrainian nation. With political parties legally operating, the moderately nationalistic National Democrats dominated Western Ukrainian politics.

In the province of Bukovina, where the ruling class was Romanian, rather than Polish, and most Ukrainians belonged to the Orthodox Church, the growth of the national movement largely followed the Galician model. This was not the case in Transcarpathia, which belonged to the Hungarian part of the dual monarchy. In Transcarpathia, Hungarian upper classes encouraged assimilation and hindered the spread of the Ukrainian national idea.

The First World War initially had the greatest impact on Western Ukraine. As the Russian army occupied Galicia and Bukovina early during the war, it sought to 'reunite' these lands with Russia. In the spring of 1915, Nicholas II paid a triumphant visit to Lemberg, where his civil administration was actively suppressing organised Ukrainian life. Austria-Hungary, in the meantime, authorised the creation of a Ukrainian legion within its army. When the tsarist regime collapsed, Ukrainian activists in Kiev promptly created the Central Rada (council), which was headed by the respected historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky. In December, the nationalists proved unable to organise effective resistance to the Bolshevik army, which had invaded from Soviet Russia. Just before abandoning Kiev, on 22 January 1918, the Central Rada proclaimed the independent Ukrainian People's Republic. However, soon it was back in the capital on the heels of the German advance. Because the German high command disliked the socialist views of the Rada's leaders, such as Volodymyr Vynnychenko, it installed the conservative General Pavlo Skoropadsky as Ukraine's monarch or *hetman* (April–December 1918). Following the German withdrawal, the re-established Ukrainian People's Republic saw its authority collapse in the chaos and violence of the civil war during which the Reds, the Whites, the Ukrainian forces, the anarchists and bands of looters fought each other until, by the end of 1920, the better-organised Reds established their control.

In Western Ukraine, the revolution started later and had a national, rather than social colouring. As the Austro-Hungarian Empire began disintegrating, in November 1918 the Ukrainian activists proclaimed the creation of the Western Ukrainian People's Republic. In January 1919, the republic entered a union with its east Ukrainian counterpart, but the unification was never implemented because Western Ukrainians had to fight their own civil war against the Entente-supported Poles, which they lost in July. Subsequently, the Allies approved Polish control over all Galicia, as well as the inclusion of Bukovina in greater Romania and that of Transcarpathia in the new state of Czechoslovakia.

Bordering Dnieper Ukraine in the south-west was Bessarabia, which we currently know under its historical name of Moldova. (The old Moldavian principality was considerably larger, and the present-day Republic of Moldova is only slightly bigger than Bessarabia proper.) In the early nineteenth century, the tsars wrested this province from the Ottoman Empire, thus depriving Moldavians of a chance to participate in the later unification of Romanian principalities. Although known as Moldavians, the region's population was ethnically Romanian and spoke dialects of the Romanian language. Economically, Bessarabia was the most backward agricultural region on the empire's western fringes, and literacy among ethnic Moldavians stood at a meagre 6 per cent (1897). When the national awakening began after the Revolution of 1905, it manifested itself primarily in the discovery of the common pan-Romanian cultural heritage. Nationalists in Romania proper also sought to establish contacts with Moldavian intellectuals hoping for eventual reunification, but, before the war and revolution, this aim looked more like a pipe dream.

The February Revolution gave Moldavians an unexpected chance to organise. By October 1917, various civic and military groups managed to convene in Chişinău a national assembly, which declared Bessarabia autonomous. The elections to a national council, *Sfatul Țării*, followed, but before this body could establish its authority, in January 1918 the Romanian army arrived in force – ostensibly by invitation of the Moldavian authorities with the aim of protecting the country from the Bolshevik peril. The *Sfatul Țării* proclaimed first the independent Moldavian Democratic Republic of Bessarabia (24 January) and then its union with Romania (27 March).¹² However, the USSR never recognised the Romanian annexation of Bessarabia, and Romanians failed to win a complete international recognition of this act.

One productive way to analyse the revolutionary events in the non-Russian borderlands is to look at the complex interaction of 'class' and 'nation' as two principal identity markers, which competed in contemporary political discourse and influenced the nationalities differently.¹³ But given that the western borderlands were positioned strategically between Russia and Western Europe, their internal ideological struggles and nation-building projects were time and again overridden by the intervention of the Great Powers, which reshaped states and nations based on their own global interests.¹⁴

¹² Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 2000), pp. 33–5.

¹³ Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*, pp. 1–83.

¹⁴ Geoff Eley, 'Remapping the Nation: War, Revolutionary Upheaval, and State Formation in Eastern Europe, 1914–1923', in *Ukrainian–Jewish Relations in Historical Perspective* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1988), pp. 205–46.

States and nations in the era of mass politics

Rogers Brubaker has suggested that the new nation-states that after the First World War replaced multinational empires were essentially 'nationalising' states, protecting and promoting the political domination, economic welfare and culture of their 'core' nations.¹⁵ This is, of course, an ideal model, useful in comparative analysis but too generalising to be sustained in most case studies. Nevertheless, the notion of a 'nationalising state' captures a significant feature of the post-war period, when states, armed with the techniques of mass politics, interfered aggressively in the nation-building processes.

At the final stages of their wars of independence, the republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania benefited from the Entente's intention to create a *cordon sanitaire* around Soviet Russia. But independence brought the need for economic reorientation towards the West, for the region's economy previously had depended on the Russian market. As hopes of remaining a mediator in Russia's trade with Western Europe did not materialise, all three countries moved to create export economies specialising in dairy and meat products. This task was made easier by the redistribution of large landed estates with little or no compensation. (Most landlords in any case belonged to another nationality, Baltic German in Estonia and Latvia, and Polish in Lithuania.) The new Baltic governments realised that, in order to prevent social discontent, they needed to turn the landless peasantry into small farmers. Indeed, the independent farming class eventually came to constitute the backbone of the Baltic states' social structures. A modest industrial sector survived in Estonia and Latvia, but failed to develop in Lithuania.

Politically, the 1920s were turbulent. All three states were established as parliamentary republics, but political parties were numerous and fragmented. The left and right wings were strong, while the centre weak. Frequent changes of government indicated the inherent instability of a political system, which contemporaries perceived as being in permanent danger of a coup from either the radical Left or the radical Right. Liberal democracy, indeed, did not survive long in the Baltics, but the authoritarian regimes that emerged in the region were not established by the extremists – ideological cousins of either Bolsheviks or Nazis – but by the traditional Right. Lithuania was the first to take flight in 1926, when the army overthrew a coalition government of populists, socialists and minorities and installed a prominent conservative nationalist, Antanas Smetona, as an authoritarian president.

¹⁵ Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, pp. 83–4 and 103–4.

In Estonia, a coup followed the Great Depression. As disappointment with parliamentary democracy grew, so did the popularity of the fascist-like League of Freedom Fighters, a paramilitary organisation of veterans of the war of independence. Before the veterans' candidate could win the presidential elections of 1934, however, Prime Minister Konstantin Päts organised a pre-emptive coup on 12 March 1934. He declared a state of emergency, dissolved the parliament and all political parties and ruled by decree until the decade's end. Latvia followed the path to authoritarianism later the same month. Faced with the challenge from the extreme right Thunder Cross movement, Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis organised a similar coup on 16 March 1934.

Authoritarian regimes in the Baltic region had many features in common. The dictators forbade all political parties (in some cases, except for their own) and censored the press, but did not completely suppress civic rights. Influenced by Italian Fascist corporatism, they actively involved the state in the regulation of the economic and social spheres. In 1938–9, the worsening international situation forced all three leaders to relax their rule somewhat. Although in the 1920s the promotion of the region's national cultures had not infringed the rights of minorities, this changed with the transition to authoritarianism. The regimes of Päts, Ulmanis and Smetona were not racist or xenophobic, but their aggressive support of national languages undermined the system of Polish and German schooling and the cultural autonomy of minorities in the Baltic countries.¹⁶

In foreign policy, all three states pursued a policy of neutrality. Lithuania was in a more difficult situation as it had long-running territorial conflicts with Poland because of the Polish incorporation of Vilnius in 1920 and with Germany because of the Lithuanian annexation of Memel (Klaipėda) in 1923. (Memel, with a predominantly German population, was then under the control of the League of Nations.) In 1938, Poland forced Lithuania to recognise Vilnius as belonging to Poland, while in March 1939 Germany wrested Klaipėda back by force. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Baltic states concluded non-aggression or neutrality agreements with the Soviet Union, followed in 1939 by similar pacts with Nazi Germany. These documents, however, offered little protection when the Great Powers again took it upon themselves to rearrange the map of Europe.

Western Belorussia and the largest part of Western Ukraine found themselves within the new Polish state. In Belorussian lands, where a modern national consciousness was slow in developing, the population's grievances

¹⁶ Hiden and Salmon, *The Baltic Nations*, pp. 55–7.

found their expression in the popularity of socialism. Following a brief interlude in the early 1920s, when minority rights had been well protected, Poland, which became an authoritarian dictatorship after 1926, adopted a policy of assimilating Belorussians by closing their schools and encouraging the spread of Roman Catholicism. In addition, Poland handled the redistribution of large landed estates in such a way that the primary beneficiaries were not the local Belorussian peasants, but Polish colonists. The Polish government repeatedly manipulated census results to play down the domination of Polish colonists in the area that was ethnically Belorussian. As a result of such policies and continued land hunger, the Communist Party of western Belorussia and its legal arm, the Belorussian Peasant and Workers' Union, grew in popularity until they were suppressed in 1927. The 1930s saw further government repressions against Belorussian cultural institutions and the forcible closure of Orthodox churches.

In Galicia, the Polish government attempted similar policies against the local Ukrainian population, but the response was different, namely, the birth of Ukrainian radical nationalism. With civic discipline and a highly developed national consciousness, Ukrainians were frustrated by the defeat of the Western Ukrainian People's Republic and the ensuing Polish domination. Assimilatory pressures only added to their sense of injustice. By the mid-1930s, it became clear that a decade of political participation, including several attempts at compromise between the leading Ukrainian party, the Ukrainian National Democratic Alliance, and the authorities, had failed to stop the national oppression. A new generation of disaffected young men and women grew disappointed with the fruitless 'collaborationism' of their elders. The moral failure of moderate nationalists cleared the way for the radical Right. At a conference in Vienna in 1929, veterans of the Ukrainian-Polish war, students and nationalist intellectuals created the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). The ideology of the new group emphasised the nation as an absolute value and the willpower of a strong minority as the way to restore a nation to its greatness. The radical Right soon grew into a mass movement.

Ukrainians in inter-war Romania also experienced a policy of assimilation, if only formulated more clearly and enforced more strictly. Although the Ukrainian and Romanian languages had little in common, the ideologues of the ruling Romanian National Liberal Party classified the Ukrainian population in Bukovina as Romanians who had forgotten their ancestral tongue.¹⁷ In contrast, the position of Ukrainians in Transcarpathia improved greatly. The

¹⁷ Paul Robert Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 602.

Czechoslovak Republic, which was the only new state in Eastern Europe that remained a liberal democracy during the entire inter-war period, provided government support for minority education and culture and allowed the use of minority languages in local administration.

When Hitler began his dismemberment of Czechoslovakia in the autumn of 1938, Transcarpathians took advantage of the situation to press for autonomy (October) and even proclaimed the short-lived independent Republic of Carpatho-Ukraine under President Avhustyn Voloshyn (15 March 1939). Nazi Germany, however, assigned Transcarpathia to its Hungarian ally, and in the spring of 1939, Hungarian troops easily overran the Ukrainian defences in what was one of the precursor conflicts of the Second World War.

Finally, Romania spent much of the inter-war period trying to integrate Bessarabia. This effort involved agrarian reform, the construction of roads and railroads and the promotion of literacy. Naturally, the government sought in the process to promote a sense of Romanian patriotism in a backward borderland. Still, the province remained poor. Its only significant export, wine, diminished when the province was separated from the Russian regions. Large minorities such as Russians, Ukrainians and Jews complained about their treatment during the Romanian cultural offensive, and even many Moldavians found it difficult to switch from the Cyrillic alphabet to Latin script. (In addition, the modern Romanian language borrowed most new political, technical and scientific terminology from French, while Moldavians were accustomed to using the Russian words.)¹⁸ All in all, not just minorities, but the Moldavians themselves made it difficult for Romania to 'nationalise' the region.

The Soviet Union, meanwhile, offered its own answer to the challenge of modern nationalism. The Bolshevik state attempted to disarm nationalism by promoting the forms of minority nationhood – national territories, languages, cultures and elites.¹⁹ During the 1920s and early 1930s, the policy of *korenizatsiia* (nativisation) resulted in the creation of national republics or autonomous units, as well as in the state's major investment in the development of non-Russian cultures. The Ukrainian and Belorussian Socialist Soviet (after 1936, Soviet Socialist) Republics were among the beneficiaries of these policies.

Although promulgated in 1923, the policy of Ukrainisation began in earnest in 1925 with the appointment of Lazar Kaganovich as the General Secretary of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Ukraine (CP(b)U). Although Kaganovich and his successor Stanislav Kosior were certainly not sympathetic to the

¹⁸ King, *The Moldovans*, pp. 43–7.

¹⁹ Terry Martin, *An Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 1–27.

Ukrainian national cause, they felt it necessary to enforce the 'party line'. The practical guidance of Ukrainisation fell to two remarkable people's commissars of education, Oleksandr Shumsky and Mykola Skrypnyk, both subsequently denounced as nationalist deviationists. Still, the results of state-run Ukrainisation were impressive. Between 1924 and 1933, the Ukrainians' share among CP(b)U members increased from 33 to 60 per cent. Literacy increased markedly, and, by 1929, an impressive 97 per cent of elementary-school students were receiving instruction in Ukrainian. In contrast to 1922, when only one Ukrainian newspaper was in existence, in 1931, 89 per cent of the republic's newspapers were published in Ukrainian.²⁰ A number of political émigrés returned, including the leading historian and former head of the Central Rada, Mykhailo Hrushevsky.

Like the rest of the USSR, however, in the late 1920s Soviet Ukraine began to experience a violent transition to rapid industrialisation and forced collectivisation of agriculture. Stalinist social transformations went hand in hand with the denunciation of 'national communists' (1928), the trial of the fictitious Union for the Liberation of Ukraine (1930) and the condemnation of Skrypnyk (who shot himself in 1933). The state's murderous grain collection policies in the republic resulted in the catastrophic famine of 1932–3, which took an estimated 4 to 6 million lives. As new archival research demonstrates, Stalin and his associates blamed problems with grain collection on nationalist sabotage within the CP(b)U.²¹ This made them even more determined to starve the Ukrainian peasantry into submission. At the same time, active Ukrainisers were condemned as nationalists and many of their reforms reversed, including Skrypnyk's standardisation of the Ukrainian language, which was allegedly designed to distance it from Russian. By the late 1930s, the authorities returned to the promotion in Ukraine of the Russian language and Russian culture.

In the Belorussian SSR, a similar policy of Belorussianisation was implemented during the 1920s. Commissar of Education and later president of the Belarussian Academy of Sciences, Usevalad Ihnatoŭski, initiated the Belorussianisation drive, but he was also among the first victims of the eventual hunt for Belorussian nationalists. (Ihnatoŭski committed suicide in 1930.)²² Like Ukraine, the Belorussian SSR in the 1930s saw an official effort to bring the national language closer to Russian. The Great Terror of the late 1930s completed the elimination of the generation of radical activists for whom

20 Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, pp. 538–45.

21 Martin, *An Affirmative Action Empire*, pp. 302–8.

22 Ivan S. Lubachko, *Belorussia under Soviet Rule, 1917–1957* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972), pp. 109–11.

socialism and non-Russian nation-building were two potentially compatible projects.

Unlike Ukraine and Belorussia, Soviet Moldavia was not made a union republic, but only an autonomous republic within the Ukrainian SSR (1924). From the very beginning, a Moldavian autonomy on the eastern bank of the Dniester, in Transnistria, was designed as a political magnet for Moldavians across the river, in Bessarabia. Ethnic Moldovans constituted only 30 per cent of the republic's population (Ukrainians had a plurality, at 48.5 per cent), but their existence was important for supporting the Soviet claim on Bessarabia. Following the high-point of Moldavianisation under Commissar for Education Pavel Chior (1928–30), this policy suffered setbacks. In a puzzling turn of events specific to Moldavia, the authorities first ordered the switch from the traditional Cyrillic script to the Latin (1932) to stress the unity of Moldavian and Romanian languages and then, the return to the Cyrillic alphabet (1938) as closer to Russian.

Before the dust settled after the reversal of nativisation policies, the Soviet nationalities policy changed again with the annexation of new territories in the west. Just as mature Stalinism established the Russians' priority status in the Soviet family of nations, Stalinist ideologues came to need an ethnic argument again in their defence of the new conquests. The secret protocol attached to the August 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop pact assigned Estonia, Latvia, the eastern part of Poland, and Bessarabia to the Soviet sphere of influence (Lithuania was added in September). The Soviet occupation of Western Ukraine and Belorussia in September 1939 was staged as the historic reunification of the Ukrainian and Belorussian nations, respectively.²³ Stalinist ideologues used the same argument to wrest Bukovina from Romania in June 1940 and Transcarpathia from Czechoslovakia in 1945. Ironically, in view of all previous and subsequent efforts at establishing a Soviet Moldovan nationality, the annexation of Bessarabia in June 1940 was likewise justified by this land's allegedly Ukrainian character.²⁴ Still, Bessarabia became part of the Moldavian autonomous republic. Western Ukraine and western Belorussia joined the existing Ukrainian and Belorussian republics, while Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania became new union republics.

During what post-Communist historians in these countries now refer to as the 'first Soviet occupation', Stalinist authorities did not have time to complete either a collectivisation of agriculture or industrialisation. They did, however,

²³ Serhy Yekelchuk, 'Stalinist Patriotism as Imperial Discourse: Reconciling the Ukrainian and Russian "Heroic Pasts", 1938–45', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 3, 1 (2002): 51–80.

²⁴ King, *The Moldovans*, 92.

nationalise existing industry and large farms. While not infringing the rights of local cultures – and in fact, promoting Ukrainian and Belorussian cultures in the former Polish-controlled territories – the bureaucrats carried out mass deportations to Siberia and Soviet Asia of former government officials, bourgeoisie, intellectuals and other ‘unreliable elements’. In tiny Estonia, the number of deportees reached 60,000; in Western Ukraine, estimates are in the hundreds of thousands.²⁵ The Katyn forest in Belorussia became the symbol of another Stalinist crime, the secret execution of thousands of Polish POWs.

The German attack in June 1941 interrupted the Stalinisation of the western republics, but the Nazis had by then abandoned their earlier plans to create a system of puppet states in the Soviet west. In any case, their racial ideology dictated different treatment of the peoples living in the occupied territories. In Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, local self-government in the form of ministries was set up and universities were allowed to function. In Ukraine and Belorussia, the natives could at best serve in municipal administration, and schooling above Grade Four was abolished. However, all these territories were exploited economically and earmarked for future incorporation into the Reich. Looking for immediate economic benefits, the German administration never really kept its promise to dissolve the collective farms in Ukraine and Belorussia or to allow the restitution of nationalised businesses in the Baltics. In all these regions and usually with the help of local collaborators, the Nazis carried out the extermination of the Jews. Late in the war, in a desperate effort to use the non-Russians’ manpower, the Nazis established national SS units composed of Estonians, Latvians and Galician Ukrainians. (This effort failed in Lithuania and was not attempted in Belorussia and eastern Ukraine, but throughout the western republics the locals were actively recruited into auxiliary troops and police.) The Germans suppressed or ignored several attempts by the nationalists to proclaim state independence and, until desperate times came in 1943, were generally wary of working with them. Especially after 1943, Soviet partisans were active in Ukraine, Belorussia and Lithuania. So were the nationalist guerrilla detachments, which originally attacked the Soviet troops but, in view of Nazi mistreatment, soon turned against the Germans as well.

The Soviet army recovered the western regions one by one between the autumn of 1943 (eastern Ukraine) and the spring of 1945 (parts of Latvia). Its advance resulted in the mass westward exodus of the population especially from the regions that had been incorporated before the war. Intellectuals

²⁵ Taagepera, *Estonia*, 67; Orest Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History*, 3rd edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), p. 456.

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and nationalist activists were over-represented among the so-called 'displaced persons', who, during the late 1940s, resettled primarily in North America, Australia and Britain. Particularly in the Baltics and Western Ukraine, the Soviet army encountered fierce resistance from the nationalist guerrillas, who congregated in the region's forests, but, by the end of the decade, the brutal Soviet counter-measures had succeeded in establishing control over the countryside. This achievement was accompanied by a new wave of mass deportations. Still, the armed resistance in the west profoundly traumatised Soviet ideologues, who subsequently always treated the region as nationalism-prone.

Between Eastern Europe and the Russian core

Territorial changes at the end of the Second World War favoured the western republics (see Map 8.1). In addition to the 1939 reunion of eastern and Western Ukraine, the Ukrainian SSR acquired Transcarpathia from Czechoslovakia. Lithuania recovered Vilnius from Poland and Klaipėda from Germany. But the population losses and destruction brought by the war made for a long recovery. While Stalinist authorities in the old Soviet regions busied themselves with reconstruction, in the newly acquired western territories their task was Sovietisation. The collectivisation of agriculture was put on hold until the late 1940s, when the authorities established their control over the countryside, but when it finally came, the collectivisation was as violent and disruptive as its all-Union model had been two decades previously.

The post-war international situation also complicated the authorities' choices. New Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe preserved their independent statehood, and Soviet ideology was at a loss to explain why, for instance, Estonia had to be a part of the USSR, while Poland had not. The very existence of the Soviet republic of Moldavia east of socialist Romania might appear superfluous. As Roman Szporluk has long argued, the emergence of socialist states in Eastern Europe in a fundamental way undermined the legitimacy of Soviet nationality policy.²⁶ Stalin's new subjects might not feel this theoretical tension. But the Soviet west also became the region most exposed to contacts with East European versions of socialism and served as the USSR's shop window turned to Eastern Europe and Scandinavia.

Either because of this window-dressing function or because of their general ideological vision of the USSR as a highly developed industrial state, the central authorities in Moscow invested heavily in the industrial development of

²⁶ Szporluk, *Russia, Ukraine*, pp. xxv–xxvi.

the western republics. The post-war period saw a quick industrial expansion, particularly in the Baltics and eastern Ukraine. Such previously agricultural areas as Lithuania, Belorussia, Western Ukraine, and Moldavia also, acquired some modern industries. Although not in the short run, industrial growth presented the western nationalities with two problems. First, their specialised production units were included in (and dependent on) the large network of the Soviet command economy. Second, much of the required skilled labour force was – whether intentionally or inevitably – recruited in Russia, thus increasing the share of the Russian population in the western republics. In one extreme case, the Latvian population of the Latvian SSR's capital, Riga, decreased from 63.0 per cent in 1939 to 44.6 per cent in 1959 and to 36.5 per cent in 1989.²⁷ In Moldavia, Bessarabia remained agrarian, while new industrial development (and new Russian migrants) were concentrated in Transnistria, the former Moldavian autonomy within the Ukrainian republic.

Politically and culturally, life in the western republics stabilised following de-Stalinisation. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Baltic republics demonstrated standards of living higher than elsewhere in the USSR, while the rest of the region (except Moldavia) was on a par with the European part of Russia. Especially in urban areas, consumerism set in with the wider availability of cars, furniture, refrigerators, vacuum cleaners and cassette recorders. Except for a brief period during the late 1950s and early 1960s, the central authorities did not openly encourage assimilation to Russian culture, although they were clearly pleased when social processes pushed in this direction. During the 1970s, especially in Belorussia and eastern Ukraine, local party leaders sometimes assisted the Russification of education, the media and urban environment. Needless to say, the Soviet authorities and the KGB remained ever watchful for manifestations of 'bourgeois nationalism' in the western borderlands, suppressing every potential source of resentment.

But the perpetual threat of 'nationalism' was built into the Soviet system, which had itself institutionalised ethnic difference. There were local administrators who, like the deputy premier Eduards Berklāvs in Latvia during the late 1950s or First Secretary Petro Shelest' in Ukraine during the 1960s, developed too strong an identification with their countries and cultures. More important, the functioning of full-fledged national cultures, even Soviet-style, required the existence of national cultural producers, groups of intellectuals who often deviated from the required intricate balance of Sovietness and national pride. There were, too, 'national religions' in some regions of the Soviet west.

²⁷ Plakans, *The Latvians*, pp. 136 and 166.

Persecutions of the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania, for instance, elicited strong popular protest. Although the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church had been forcibly dissolved in 1946, it retained a considerable following in Western Ukraine as a 'catacomb Church'.

Publicly, only small groups of intellectuals dared to express their discontent with the Soviet nationalities policy. Although much lionised in post-Soviet nationalist historiographies, the dissident movement did not and could not have brought down the Soviet Empire. Until its rebirth under Gorbachev, the dissident movement remained the cause of hundreds, at most a couple of thousand activists. The dissident movement in fact began with attempts to show that Stalin and his successors had forsaken the 'Leninist' notions of national equality. This was the principal message of *Internationalism or Russification?* by the prominent Ukrainian dissident Ivan Dziuba. Subsequently, the dissenters began openly advocating national rights and self-determination, as well as the advancement of civil rights. In Ukraine, by far the largest western republic, the generation of the 'sixtiers' first explored the limits of artistic expression but soon established an opposition to the regime on the issues of civil rights and cultural freedoms. The underground *Ukrainian Herald* began appearing in 1970, and a large Ukrainian Helsinki Watch, one of only two such groups in the Soviet west, emerged in Kiev in 1976 under the leadership of the former establishment writer Mykola Rudenko.

Interestingly, in view of its weaker industrial development, Lithuania led Estonia and Latvia in the growth of a nationalist dissident movement. There, workers and peasants were far more prominent than in Russian or Ukrainian dissent, which was dominated by intellectuals. Petitions in defence of the Catholic Church collected tens of thousands of signatures, and the underground *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* appeared steadily from 1972. In 1972, following the self-immolation of a nineteen-year-old non-conformist, mass youth protests took place in the city of Kaunas.²⁸ In 1976, the Lithuanian Helsinki Watch group came into existence under the leadership of Victoras Petkus. (It was suppressed in two years.) In Latvia, the 1971 letter by '17 Latvian Communists' (who, as was revealed later, included Berklāvs) complained to foreign Communist parties about the advances of assimilation in the republic. In Estonia, the 1972 memorandum to the UN that decried Russification and demanded restoration of independent statehood marked the birth of organised dissent. On the fortieth anniversary of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact (1979),

²⁸ V. Stanley Vardys and Judith B. Sedaitis, *Lithuania: The Rebel Nation* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 84–92.

dissidents of all three Baltic nations issued a declaration demanding its nullification. Among the signatories were thirty-seven Lithuanians, four Estonians, and four Latvians. In contrast to other nations of the region, the dissident movement in Estonia exploded briefly in 1980–1, under the influence of contemporary events in Poland, but was immediately weakened by arrests and imprisonments.

In contrast, dissent in Belorussia was unorganised and limited to statements by intellectuals in defence of the national language. In Moldavia, even such sporadic expressions of discontent were rare.

By the early 1980s, the general population in the Soviet west was reasonably informed about living standards in Eastern Europe and the so-called capitalist countries and in its majority was cynical about Soviet ideology. Multiple indications of malfunctions in the Soviet economy and various social problems – from the lowest birth rate Union-wide in Estonia and Latvia to one of the highest child mortality rates Union-wide in rural Moldova – caused citizens to privately question the efficiency of Soviet socialism. Yet, in those years the authorities almost succeeded in rooting out organised dissent. Mass expression of discontent did not emerge until Gorbachev's *glasnost* began creating a genuine public sphere. Only the reforms originating in Moscow allowed the non-Russian national movements to resume their interrupted (or 'frozen') nation-building projects by returning to what Hroch designates as the stage of mass mobilisation. In all western republics, the national cause acquired a truly mass following only after the long-suppressed economic frustrations and social tensions had flowed into the default channel of nationalistic discourse.

In a recent, fundamental study of the Soviet Union's collapse, Mark R. Beissinger argues that nationalist mobilisation proceeded in 'tides' within which the example of one region could influence developments in others. In the rise of secessionist movements within the USSR, the Balts were in the avant-garde. As Beissinger shows repeatedly in his book, other nationalities drew encouragement from their successes and emulated their methods.²⁹ This, however, applies to the political separatist movement, while the national awakening of the *glasnost* period was originally a more complex phenomenon, which began as an ecological and cultural movement. Arguably, the movement started after the Chernobyl' disaster in April 1986, which both prompted Gorbachev to expand the limits of *glasnost* and gave birth to mass environmentalist movements.

²⁹ Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

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Even in the Baltics, the first open protests were against the grand designs of Soviet industry. In Estonia, the first mass meeting opposed Moscow's new phosphorus-mining project, which would damage the country's environment (1987). In 1988, the so-called 'singing revolution' symbolised the breakthrough in cultural revival. The national movement finally reached its organisational stage with the formation of the Estonian Popular Front in April 1988. In Latvia, the first successful effort at open mobilisation of the public was aimed against the construction of a hydroelectric dam on the Daugava River in 1987. Later in the same year, the so-called 'calendar' demonstrations followed, commemorating the 1941 deportations, marking the anniversary of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, and celebrating the proclamation of independence in 1918. In October 1988, a popular front was constituted in the republic. Lithuania, where the Communist Party had been slower in answering the Kremlin's call for reforms, was the last to join the string of demonstrations in the Baltic region, with the first public meeting being organised by a group of Catholic activists on 23 August 1987, to mark the anniversary of the Soviet–German Pact. The popular front known as Sajūdis was established in June 1988.

The transition from the stage of cultural and ecological protests to the stage of political mobilisation took longer in Belorussia. There, national awakening began during 1987–8 with cultural figures petitioning the government for the protection of Belorussian culture against assimilation but escalated into open expressions of discontent in June 1988 with the discovery of mass graves of the victims of Stalinist terror in the Kurapaty forest. As the most powerful symbol of Stalinist crimes – and of what was seen as the Soviet regime's general criminal nature – Kurapaty galvanised public opinion. By October, the Belorussian analogue of Moscow's Memorial Society emerged under the name of the Martyrology of Belorussia Association. Led by the archaeologist Zianon Paźniak, this group immediately began organising the Belorussian Popular Front (BPF) but met fierce resistance from the authorities. At this point, Belorussian activists had already established contacts with Sajūdis. The BPF's founding congress consequently took place in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius in June 1989.³⁰ Still, the republic's government effectively prevented the BPF from reaching out to the countryside.

In Ukraine, where the party leadership kept a lid on public opinion until as late as 1989, the development of the national movement combined the traits of the Lithuanian and Belorussian models. In Western Ukraine, a mass

³⁰ David Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999), pp. 47–8.

movement for the restoration of the Greek Catholic Church emerged in 1987. (The authorities finally gave their permission in late 1989.) In the east, the plight of Chernobyl' was the earliest uniting factor as well as the most obvious symbol of the regime's ineffectiveness and criminal secretiveness. The public ecological association, the Green World, was founded in 1987, while the organisation in defence of the national language, the Taras Shevchenko Ukrainian Language Society, was not established until February 1989. But in the same month, a more important political organisation came into existence, namely, the Popular Movement for Restructuring. Better known simply as Rukh (Movement), it was similar in structure and political aims to the Baltic popular fronts at the early stage of their development.

In Moldavia, the party managed to keep the forces of change at bay until mid-1988. But when the breakthrough came in the summer of that year, the republic's intellectuals promptly established both cultural organisations and the more politically oriented Democratic Movement in Support of Restructuring. (These and other pro-reform groups in May 1989 united in the Moldavian Popular Front.) Like the Ukrainian opposition, the Moldavian opposition united around the language issue, which in the Moldavian case entailed not just the status and protection of Moldavian as a state language, but also the recognition of its unity with Romanian and its 'return' to the Latin script. But in all republics of the western belt, the language issue was a political issue.

Although all of them had been created ostensibly to assist Gorbachev in the implementation of his *perestroika* policies, the popular fronts in the Soviet west soon concentrated on the issues specific to their nations. Originally they were limited to language, the environment and Stalinist crimes, but these issues already challenged the Soviet Union's legitimacy. Ultimately, Gorbachev's reforms gave nationalists the opportunity to go public, and the Kremlin proved unable to prevent them from starting mass mobilisations. Initially, popular fronts included reformist Communists and minorities, but the opposition they encountered from the conservative party leadership in most republics, as well as from the emerging minority movements, radicalised their ideology. The seemingly easy collapse of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe was also a contributing factor. By 1990, the popular fronts had evolved from the defence of democratic rights in the republics to the defence of national interests of the titular nations.

During 1989, the national movements went political and succeeded in capturing the protest vote in the Soviet west. Once again, Moscow initiated this turn of events by calling free elections to the All-Union Congress of People's Deputies (March–May 1989). In Lithuania, Sajūdis won all the seats except

two that went to national Communists whom the nationalists did not oppose. In Estonia and Latvia, nationalists also won, although on a less impressive scale. On the fiftieth anniversary of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, 23 August 1989, the Baltic popular fronts mounted the most imposing protest action yet when they organised a human chain of some 2 million people from Tallinn to Vilnius. The event drew the world's attention to the growing national unrest in the region.

In 1990, elections to republican parliaments (Supreme Soviets) revealed the emerging political realignment. In Lithuania, where the majority of Communist Party members belonged to the titular nationality, the party proclaimed its independence from the All-Union Party (November 1989). In the months leading to the elections, the reformist Communist leader Algirdas Brazauskas co-operated with the Popular Front, but his party won only a minority of seats. In March 1990, the parliament elected as president the nationalist Vytautas Landsbergis and voted unanimously for the republic's independence, which the Kremlin did not recognise and which was later revoked after a three-month economic blockade.³¹ In Estonia and Latvia, the Communist parties captured the votes of primarily ethnic Russians, yet nationalists had a majority and in March 1990 could proclaim – although not as clearly as the Lithuanians had – their republics' intention to re-establish their independence. Perhaps more important, the Baltic governments began asserting their economic independence by stopping financial contributions to the central budget and initiating independent economic reforms.

While Gorbachev was shocked by the mass support for separatism, he remained reluctant to use force in the republics. Although the local press repeatedly warned about an impending crackdown, it never materialised as a large-scale military operation. Rather, in January 1991, a series of smaller incidents took place in the Baltic states, with the Kremlin either denying its involvement or apologising for the 'unintended violence'. In Lithuania, Soviet troops took control of the radio and TV centre, killing fourteen people and injuring 150. In Latvia, five people died and ten were injured when Soviet police special forces captured the building of the Ministry of the Interior. Because these events received extensive media coverage both within and outside the USSR, instead of harassing nationalists as intended, they actually harmed the cause of those in Moscow who had favoured the use of violence in the borderlands.

³¹ Alfred Erich Senn, 'Lithuania: Rights and Responsibilities of Independence', in Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (eds.), *New States, New Politics: Building the Post-Soviet Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 356–61.

In contrast, the March 1990 elections to the Supreme Soviet of the Belorussian SSR demonstrated the extent of the authorities' control, with the Communist Party winning 86 per cent of seats. After years of prodding by the intelligentsia, party bureaucrats did agree in January 1990 to pass a law making Belorussian the official language of the state. (Similar laws were by then passed in all other republics of the Soviet west.) Yet, in practice the population of Belorussia remained the most Russified and the least politically active in the region.

In Ukraine, support for Rukh was unevenly distributed geographically. In Western Ukraine, the national movement enjoyed mass support, while in the east it relied primarily on the humanitarian intelligentsia in the cities. Correspondingly, during the 1990 elections, Rukh captured most seats from the western provinces and some in big urban centres, but its total was only 90 out of 450 seats. Hard-line Communists remained policy makers in the republic, although they now had to face opposition in the parliament. Still, following the example of other republics, especially Russia, the majority felt it necessary to pass a declaration of sovereignty (July 1990), which was more an affirmation of the republic's rights than a separatist statement.

In Moldavia, however, the Popular Front, together with the reformist Communists, won the majority of seats during the 1990 elections. The majority pushed through a number of Romanian-oriented cultural reforms, which alienated the minorities. (It is worth noting, nevertheless, that the idea of union with Romania had little support even among Moldavians.) In August 1990, the Turkic-speaking Gagauz population in the south declared a separate Gagauz Republic with its capital in Comrat, and in September, Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians in Transnistria created the Dniester Republic with its capital in Tiraspol'. Some 50,000 Moldavian nationalist volunteers immediately marched on the Dniester Republic, where fighting would go on intermittently for several years.

When the abortive coup in August 1991 destroyed the centre's remaining power structures, the Baltic republics were the first to claim their full independence. The Estonian parliament passed a motion to this effect on 20 August, and the first international recognition, from Iceland, followed on 22 August. Yeltsin's Russia was a close second, on 24 August, while both the USA and the USSR hesitated until early September. Although the Soviet military went violent in Riga, Latvia and Lithuania were equally prompt and successful in asserting their independent statehood. At the end of September, all three states already had separate seats at the UN General Assembly.

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In Ukraine and Belarus, Communist-dominated parliaments also issued declarations of independence, on 24 and 25 August, respectively. Disoriented by the collapse of the party's centralised controls, local bureaucrats let themselves be persuaded by nationalists and reformers. Moreover, former Communists envisaged their continuing rule after independence. The Ukrainian referendum on independence on 1 December 1991, with over 90 per cent voting in favour of separate statehood, delivered the final blow to the idea of reviving the Soviet Union. The general population, including the minority voters, was swept away by the promises of economic prosperity that state-run media and nationalist agitators issued so easily. Moldova was the last to declare independence, on 27 August 1991, and the question of possible union with Romania that overnight acquired practical significance caused further splits within both the Popular Front and among the reformist Communists.

In the years after the Soviet Union's death, the western republics went their separate roads, albeit the ones determined to a significant degree by Russian politics in the region. But the legacy of twentieth-century nation-building was more important yet. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania never considered joining the Commonwealth of Independent States, but the treatment of large Russian minorities, especially in Estonia and Latvia, became the major issue between Russia and them. In fact, during the early 1990s, Estonia and Latvia considered all post-1940 immigrants and their children non-citizens requiring naturalisation. The disenfranchisement of minority residents who could not pass a difficult language exam earned Estonia and Latvia reprimands from the European Union and human rights organisations. Although the three states moved quickly to reorient their economies towards the West and introduce market reforms, their continuing connection with Russia was demonstrated as late as 1998, when their economies suffered downturns as a result of the Russian financial collapse. Still, the three Baltic states were extremely successful in what they billed as their 'return to Europe'. In the spring of 2004, all three joined the European Union and NATO.

In contrast, Ukraine still struggles to assert its separateness from Russia, especially in the economic and cultural spheres. Under President Leonid Kravchuk, the state sponsored the Ukrainisation of public life and education, normalised relations with Russia and quelled minority unrest. Yet, the lack of economic reforms caused Kravchuk's downfall. President Leonid Kuchma (1994–2004) came to power on the platform of rebuilding economic ties with Russia and restoring the Russian language to its previously prominent role, but for most of his rule, he tried to maintain a balance between Russia and

the West. Still, under Kuchma, Russian financial interests came to control much of Ukraine's industry and mass culture. Late in 2004 Kuchma's attempt to transfer power to a hand-picked successor failed as hundreds of thousands of orange-clad oppositionists occupied Kiev's main square, protesting against the rigged elections. The peaceful 'Orange Revolution' brought to power pro-Western President Viktor Yushchenko (2005–), who promised to fight corruption and take Ukraine 'back to Europe'.

Finally, Belarus and Moldova experienced a troubled post-Soviet transition. In Belarus, continuous economic decline during the early 1990s eroded already weak support for separate statehood. In 1994, a pro-Russian populist, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, won the presidential elections, putting the country on the path of assimilation, preservation of Soviet-style economy and economic dependence on Russia. Lukashenka's rule eventually deteriorated into an oppressive dictatorship. Formally, Belarus was to enter into union with Russia (1997), a union that was proclaimed but never consummated because of the Russian authorities' reluctance. In Moldova, the early years of independence were marred by political fragmentation over the question of national identity, as well as by ethnic violence, while the second part of the decade saw the reassertion of Russian political and economic influence. The conflict in Transnistria escalated in 1992, and, although Yeltsin's mediation helped to negotiate a ceasefire, the self-proclaimed Dniester Republic remains *de facto* independent. The faltering economy and huge state salary and pension arrears buoyed the popularity of unreformed Communists, who in 2001 won the parliamentary elections with 50.1 per cent of the votes. The parliament elected as president Vladimir Voronin, who proclaimed a course of closer co-operation with Russia.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the former Soviet west no longer exists as a region distinguished by its one-time connection to non-Russian European states or by the brief period of pre-Soviet independence. If the countries of the western belt with their widely disparate economic, political and cultural profiles still have anything in common, it is their Soviet legacy: a considerable Russian minority, economic ties with Russia and Russia's security interest in the area. Only in the cultural sphere, although not without political implications, do local identities continue to be defined in their relation to the Soviet project.