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National Bolshevism

*Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation
of Modern Russian National Identity,
1931–1956*

David Brandenberger

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Introduction: Mobilization, Populism, and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity

Soviet society witnessed a major ideological about-face in the mid- to late 1930s as the threat of war and the need for popular mobilization caused party propaganda and mass culture to assume a stridently pragmatic orientation. Paradoxical as it may seem, Russian national heroes, imagery, and myths were deployed during this time to popularize the reigning Marxist-Leninist ideology, a populist practice which at times threatened to eclipse the stress on internationalism and class-consciousness that had characterized nearly two decades of Soviet mass culture.

Examining this transformation in party ideology during the late 1930s, this study also considers the resonance that the coup elicited among Russian-speaking Soviet citizens over the course of almost twenty years. While the period's selective rehabilitation of tsarist heroes and historical imagery is sufficiently iconoclastic to justify such an investigation, no less interesting are the ways in which individual Soviet citizens perceived this ideological turnabout. Making use of sources that provide glimpses of public opinion, this work considers not only the construction and dissemination of stalinist ideology between the early 1930s and the mid-1950s, but its popular *reception* on the mass level as well.

Long a source of controversy, the ideological transformations of the 1930s were termed "the revolution betrayed," "Thermidor," and "the Great Retreat" by contemporaries like L. D. Trotskii and Nicholas Timasheff. In the years since, scholars have returned again and again to the stalinist regime's deployment of official russocentrism. Following Timasheff, a number of commentators have linked the phenomenon to nationalist sympathies within the party hierarchy,¹ eroding prospects for world revolution,² and the stalinist elite's revision of Marxist principles.³ Others associate the transformation with increasing threats from the outside world

(principally Hitler's rise to power in 1933),⁴ the emergence of domestic etatism,⁵ the triumph of administrative pragmatism over revolutionary utopianism,⁶ and the evolution of Soviet nationality policy.⁷ Some tend to discount the changes underway as symptomatic of larger ideological dynamics,⁸ while others contend that the phenomenon really matured only early in the 1940s in connection with the exigencies of war.⁹

Much of this controversy stems from the difficulty of tracing a smooth, linear rise in the use of russocentric rhetoric and imagery during the mid-1930s. Not only do parallel propaganda campaigns promoting "Soviet patriotism" and "the Friendship of the Peoples" obscure the origins of russocentrism in stalinist mass culture,¹⁰ but the absence of critical archival collections complicates even behind-the-scenes investigations.¹¹ That said, sources do exist that can shed light on how ideology evolved between 1931 and 1956. The central thesis of this study identifies a preoccupation with state-building,¹² popular mobilization, and legitimacy during the mid-1930s as ultimately explaining the party hierarchy's populist ideological about-face. Put another way, a new sense of pragmatism came to the fore within the party hierarchy of the 1930s, which concluded that the utopian proletarian internationalism that had defined Soviet ideology during its first fifteen years was actually hamstringing efforts to mobilize the society for industrialization and war. Searching for a more compelling rallying call, Stalin and his inner circle eventually settled upon a russocentric form of etatism as the most effective way to promote state-building and popular loyalty to the regime.

But more than just a way of mobilizing Russian-speaking society for industrialization and war, this "national Bolshevik" line marked a sea change in Soviet ideology—a tacit acknowledgment of the superiority of populist, nativist, and even nationalist rallying calls over propaganda oriented around utopian idealism. Pragmatic if not wholly cynical, the stalinist party hierarchy's use of Russian national heroes, myths, and imagery to popularize the dominant Marxist-Leninist line signaled a symbolic abandonment of an earlier revolutionary ethos in favor of a strategy calculated to mobilize popular support for an unpopular regime by whatever means necessary. Finally—and most intriguingly—this ideological coup should be seen as the catalyst for the formation of a mass sense of national identity within Russian-speaking society between the late 1930s and early 1950s, during the most cruel and difficult years of the Soviet period.

Underlying much of this study's theoretical frame of reference are the seminal works of such prominent thinkers as Benedict Anderson, Ernest

Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, and Miroslav Hroch.¹³ These theorists identify print culture and mass education as playing a crucial role in the expansion of a sense of national identity from social elites to ordinary people within society at large. Contextualizing such “national awakenings” across much of Europe within the second half of the nineteenth century, Anderson frames the process of nation formation as one in which a vast, disaggregated collection of individuals, often united by little more than a common language, is induced to “imagine” itself as a national community. Rogers Brubaker, John Breuilly, Paul Brass, and others stress the role of self-interested political entrepreneurs and the state in this process.¹⁴ What is critical to note, however, is that for a complex series of reasons, national identity in Russian-speaking society remained inchoate and internally inconsistent considerably longer than in other European societies, assuming a modern, systematic form only during the Stalin era, long after the fall of the *ancien régime*. This monograph analyzes the circumstances surrounding this late development of Russian national identity, as well as the consequences of its formation within one of the most authoritarian societies of the twentieth century.

In recent years, few subjects have produced a greater diversity of scholarship than the study of nationalism and national identity formation. But for all of this abstract interest in the role played by political agents, print capitalism, universal public education, and mass culture in the formation of popular national consciousness, remarkably few studies have examined the process in detail on an empirical level, considering not just the construction and dissemination of national ideology, but its popular *reception* as well.¹⁵ Focusing exclusively on theory, national elites, or newspapers, most scholarship has neglected the role that common people play in the dynamic. This is unfortunate, as it would seem incautious to automatically conflate the construction and dissemination of ideology with its reception—audiences, after all, rarely accept ideological pronouncements wholesale. In an attempt to eschew such a top-down methodological bias, this study takes an explicitly multidimensional approach to the question of ideology and mass mobilization in order to account for the idiosyncrasies of national identity formation on the popular level.

Chapter 1 begins with an examination of Russian-speaking society at the turn of the century—a time when one could observe in many European countries the acceleration of societal dynamics that typically contribute to mass mobilization and national identity formation (such as the spread of literacy and print culture). Chapter 1 argues, however, that although universal education and mass culture were already facts of ev-

everyday life in countries like France during this era, a variety of factors prevented Russian-speaking society from enjoying the benefits of such basic societal institutions until the early 1930s.

Chapters 2 through 6 look at issues of identity formation in the Soviet Union during the decade preceding the Second World War by examining the party hierarchy's evolving strategy for social mobilization and the inculcation of a popular sense of patriotism. Individual chapters analyze each of the dimensions of this process: the construction of ideology within the party hierarchy; its dissemination through public education, party study circles, and state-sponsored mass culture; and its reception within the society at large. Empirical in design, this approach pays particular attention to the complexities involved in the formulation of a sense of group identity, the difficulties of transmitting it to the popular level, and the peculiarities of its mass reception.

Insofar as identity formation is a long-term process requiring commitment and consistency, Chapters 7 through 10 trace this dynamic through the war years, while Chapters 11 through 14 follow it into the mid-1950s. In each period, individual chapters address the construction of ideology, its dissemination, and its reception, detailing a tightly controlled process in which mass agitation in the public schools and party study circles was reinforced by broad attention to the same themes throughout official Soviet mass culture (literature, the press, film, theater, museum exhibitions, and so on). Long misunderstood, the stalinist party hierarchy's deployment of Russian national heroes, myths, and iconography was essentially a pragmatic move to augment the more arcane aspects of Marxism-Leninism with populist rhetoric designed to bolster Soviet state legitimacy and promote a society-wide sense of allegiance to the USSR. This study argues that Stalin and his entourage did not aim to promote Russian ethnic interests during these years so much as they attempted to foster a maximally accessible, populist sense of *Soviet* social identity through the instrumental use of russocentric appeals.

It is important to note that although these efforts to stimulate popular support for Soviet state-building reveal a quintessentially monolithic approach to agitational propaganda, they were nevertheless subject to limitations imposed by the society's educational level. This study demonstrates that selective assimilation of the official line by Russian-speaking society over the course of roughly twenty years led to an outcome that the party hierarchy only dimly anticipated—the coalescing of an increasingly coherent and articulate sense of *Russian* national identity among ordinary

individuals on the popular level. Although the official line attempted to promote Marxism-Leninism, proletarian internationalism, and Soviet patriotism through a vocabulary of russocentric imagery and iconography, many of the philosophical dimensions of this propaganda were simply lost on its audience. Ironic in the sense that the Stalin era's incipient social *mentalité* assumed a form that was qualitatively more "Russian" than "Soviet" (at least in the classic, Marxist sense of the word), this unintended consequence of the party's populism has reverberated throughout the former lands of the USSR ever since.

As is apparent from the preceding discussion, my mapping of the dynamic of national identity formation on the popular level attributes a larger role to the state and to political entrepreneurs than Anderson, Hroch, and others have tended to suggest, insofar as it is often only these agents who possess the means to disseminate a coherent national line through mass culture and education across the entire breadth of society. The Soviet case also indicates that the popularization of ethnically uniform heroes, myths, icons, and imagery does not necessarily have to be explicitly nationalistic in order to precipitate the formation of a corresponding national community. Supplying the empirical research necessary for a detailed understanding of how a sense of national identity took shape among Russian-speakers in the USSR, this work explains not only why this phenomenon occurred so deep into the twentieth century, but why it came to pass within a society that was ostensibly geared toward the promotion of utopian social identities based on class consciousness and proletarian internationalism.

Several terms should be defined in order to clarify the dimensions of the ensuing discussion. It is axiomatic to this study that national identity be understood to stem primarily from membership within a discrete community (a "people") that defines itself both by the foreignness of other societies and by its own ethnic distinctiveness. This sense of distinctiveness associated with nationhood often endows constituents with a sense of belonging to a "superior" or "elite" group.¹⁶ Historical, geographic, cultural, and linguistic particularism all play critical roles in the coalescing of this sense of affiliation, which typically supersedes other forms of allegiance based on race, class, gender, religious faith, or economic system.¹⁷

In light of the diversity of scholarly opinion concerning national identity, a caveat would seem to be in order. Commentators rarely agree on the factors that are most central to national identity formation—race, ethnic-

ity, language, culture, religious faith, and geographic contiguousness each have their proponents and skeptics. One issue that is commonly agreed upon, however, is the importance of history in defining national identity.¹⁸ The regularity with which historical events are invented, suppressed, reinterpreted, and distorted testifies to the centrality of the past in people's conceptualization of the present—to paraphrase Ernest Renan, getting history wrong is part of being a nation.¹⁹ This study considers the historical narrative—the myth of common national origins and its pantheon of heroes—to be the key to the formation of an articulate sense of national identity.²⁰

Because this study concerns itself with *popular* national identity and consciousness, it focuses on views and attitudes that are nationally coherent and consistent—beliefs held throughout a given society by constituents from all social strata. Although national elites figure prominently in the pages that follow, every attempt has been made to broaden this study's scope of inquiry to account for opinions and beliefs expressed outside the intelligentsia within society at large.²¹ At its essence, then, this is an analysis of the origins of popular Russian national identity, a widely held sense of “special significance” imparted by an awareness of an association with a common territory, state, society, and historical experience.

The distinction between russocentrism and Russian nationalism is critical to understanding the discussion that follows. Whereas the former is an expression of ethnic pride and is derived from a strong, articulate sense of Russian national identity, the latter—according to Gellner's definition—is a much more politicized concept referring to group aspirations for political sovereignty and self-rule along national lines.²² Although this study spends a considerable amount of time examining expressions of Russian national pride between the late 1930s and the mid-1950s, “nationalism” as such rarely factors into the narrative. After all, the party hierarchy never endorsed the idea of Russian self-determination or separatism and vigorously suppressed all those who did, consciously drawing a line between the positive phenomenon of national identity formation and the malignancy of full-blown nationalist ambitions.²³

Referred to as “national Bolshevism” by M. N. Riutin, the line promoted by the stalinist party hierarchy essentially cloaked a Marxist-Leninist worldview within russocentric, etatist rhetoric. National Bolshevism, in this sense, describes a peculiar form of Marxist-Leninist etatism that fused the pursuit of communist ideals with more statist ambitions reminiscent of tsarist “Great Power” (*velikoderzhavnye*) traditions. Insofar as the focus on

Great Power status tended to be the dominant component of this ideology, the role of Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism was often limited to the level of rhetoric.²⁴

Equally important for the purposes of this study is the distinction between state and nation. Theodore Weeks provides perhaps the most eloquent introduction to the difference between the two concepts, noting that while the terms may not vary greatly in English or French parlance, "in Central and Eastern Europe, the distinction between the nation and the state is more clear-cut, even linguistically. In German, one speaks of *Volk* or *Staat*; in Polish *naród* or *państwo*; in Russian *narod* or *gosudarstvo*. When dealing with the world outside of Western Europe . . . we must take pains not to muddle these two terms [and] not to assume that a nation 'naturally' has a state."²⁵ If state refers to a country and its governing institutions, nation is best understood as a group of individuals who share an ethnically inflected sense of mass identity. Political agitation in favor of a strong central state apparatus is referred to in the pages that follow as etatism and is to be distinguished from nationalism, which describes the political ambitions of a particular nation or ethnic group.

Other terms requiring clarification include patriotism and populism. The former, a sense of loyalty and allegiance to one's homeland, is a rallying call that is central to most states' attempts at mass mobilization. Populism is a genre of political campaigning that is also often used during mass mobilization. It refers to a style of propaganda designed for use on the mass level and generally appeals to the lowest common denominator of society. Slogans are often simplistic and inflammatory, and play upon emotion rather than reason. Synonyms include words with more explicitly chauvinist connotations like nativism or jingoism.

Finally, as is already evident from the preceding discussion, a group of individuals referred to as the party hierarchy looms large in this study. This turn of phrase ascribes agency to those responsible for decision making in the Soviet system while attempting to improve upon more traditional nomenclature. Although recent studies have shown Stalin to have held enormous power during the time period in question, it would seem simplistic and reductionist to attribute to him every decision made during his tenure.²⁶ Such a puppet-master paradigm not only mythologizes Stalin's leadership capacities (in a perverse inversion of his infamous personality cult), but it obscures the decisive roles played by ranking party members like A. A. Zhdanov, A. S. Shcherbakov, and G. F. Aleksandrov. But if it seems necessary to expand the scope of inquiry beyond Stalin's chancel-

lery, it would be a mistake to suggest that power was as broadly diffused as terms like “the party” tend to imply. Composite constructions like “the party-state” likewise exaggerate the power wielded by the bureaucracy and downplay the degree to which the upper echelons of the party elite monopolized all real decision-making authority. Hence “party hierarchy” is used in the pages that follow to signify the small, exclusive group of party members in Stalin’s entourage who wielded power in Soviet society between the early 1930s and the mid-1950s.

It has long been known that the stalinist party leadership from time to time appropriated imagery and symbols from the old regime. Resolving the long-standing debate over the nature and significance of this flirtation with the Russian national past (particularly the co-option of tsarist heroes, myths, and iconography), this study argues that such practices during the mid- to late 1930s amounted to no less than an ideological about-face. Profoundly pragmatic and unabashedly populist, this ideological shift had a transformative effect on Russo-Soviet society that has remained largely unacknowledged by scholars until the present day.

The origins of this turnabout can be traced back to the mid- to late 1920s. Frustrated with the failure of early propaganda campaigns, Stalin and his entourage began to look for new ways to bolster the legitimacy of Bolshevik rule during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Their search was complicated by the need to mobilize popular support within a society that had proven to be too poorly educated to be inspired by unadulterated Marxism-Leninism alone. Distancing themselves from fifteen years of idealistic, utopian sloganeering, Stalin and his colleagues gradually refashioned themselves as etatists and began to selectively rehabilitate famous personalities and familiar symbols from the Russian national past. Earlier Marxist sloganeering was integrated into a reconceptualized history of the USSR that increasingly stressed Russian aspects of the Soviet past. At the same time, the master narrative was simplified and popularized in order to maximize its appeal to the USSR’s marginally educated citizenry. By 1937, party ideology had assumed a valence that I refer to as national Bolshevism.

More consistent and articulate than previously believed, this new catechism came to play a central role in public schools and party educational institutions for almost twenty years. Textbooks published in 1937 replaced all competing curricular materials and established a historiographic orthodoxy over almost a thousand years of Russo-Soviet history. Serving as

obligatory handbooks for students and adults alike, the new texts also scripted the depiction of historical events and personages in the works of A. N. Tolstoi, S. M. Eisenstein, and numerous other great names of the period, in fields ranging from literature and verse to the stage and screen. The dimensions of this curricular program and its accompanying agitational campaign—visible in the continuous participation of leading officials, the scale of the textbooks' print runs, and the enormity of its influence over mass culture—indicate that this new master narrative should be considered one of the great projects of the Stalin era.

Ironically, despite the monolithic nature of this national Bolshevik line, it did not fully succeed in conveying its intended message to the society as a whole. Designed to promote state legitimacy and a popular sense of Soviet patriotism, this propaganda stimulated other sorts of feeling and emotions on the mass level as well. This should come as no great surprise to many readers, as audiences rarely assimilate what they are told in toto without some degree of simplification, essentialization, or misunderstanding. In this case, despite the party hierarchy's conscious efforts to balance its populist russocentric etatism with Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism, the population at large generally failed to grasp this line's more philosophical "socialist" dimensions. Too complex and abstract to engage the popular imagination and play a formative role in shaping the society's historical *mentalité*, these elements were eclipsed by more familiar aspects of the party's new narrative, particularly Russian national imagery, heroes, myths, and parables. In other words, although Stalin and his entourage intended to promote little more than a patriotic sense of loyalty to the party and state between 1931 and 1956, their approach to popular mobilization ultimately contributed to no less than the formation of a mass sense of Russian national identity in Soviet society. Insofar as this new sense of social identity proved durable enough to survive the fall of the USSR itself in 1991, an appreciation of this complex inheritance from the Stalin era would seem necessary not only for those who study the past, but for those concerned with the present and future of Russian-speaking society as well.