

Russia or the Soviet Union?

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RUSSIA OR THE SOVIET
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Russia or the Soviet Union? There is a difference.

The Problem. For two generations, the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics have faced each other as superpowers. Along with the increasing importance of the Soviet Union in world affairs, one might expect that the American public, and particularly American educators, would become more knowledgeable about the peoples of the Soviet Union. Only an informed citizenry and political leadership will be capable of making sound decisions on policies toward the Soviet Union. Yet, one is often struck by most Americans' unfamiliarity with the basic geography, history, political structure, and cultures of the peoples of the Soviet Union. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the widespread assumption that all Soviet citizens are Russians and that the Soviet Union is Russia.

The term "Russia" is routinely used as a synonym for the Soviet Union on American television, on radio, in popular publications, in the press, and even in university lectures. Although many people are aware that the Soviet Union is made up of numerous nationalities, the shorthand use of "Russia" continues to confuse even well-educated Americans. It often leads to absurd situations. American sportscasters look dumbfounded when after congratulating a Soviet athlete for his victory as a "Russian" Olympic Champion, the athlete adamantly asserts that he is a Georgian. American delegations proclaim their love of Russia and Russian culture to their hosts in Vilnius, only to find their hosts respond with hurt Lithuanian pride. Teachers inform their Armenian-American and Ukrainian-American students that they cannot select Armenia and Ukraine for their school projects, since they are not "countries" but regions of Russia. Even the National Geographic Society, which valiantly struggles against Americans' widespread ignorance of the world beyond their borders, has recently issued a book with the confusing title "Journey Across Russia: The Soviet Union Today."

The most surprising aspect of the problem is that most Americans cling to the concept of the Soviet Union as Russia, while Soviets, including Russians, insist that their state is a federation of national republics. Even though the republics have little autonomy and the regime follows a policy of Russification, the Soviet leadership carefully adheres to a terminology which reflects the multinational nature of the federation of fifteen union republics.

The Causes. Why then does the American educational system, press, and public stubbornly continue to view all Soviet citizens as Russians and the country as Russia? In part, the problem is one of historical terminology. The Russian empire of the nineteenth century included most of the areas now in the Soviet Union—therefore the USSR is viewed merely as transformed Russia. Since the Tsarist empire was created from a Russian core and espoused a Russian nationalist ideology, Americans overlook the existence of non-Russians in that state. With little historical perspective, Americans view Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Baltic area and Ukraine as always naturally



having been a part of Russia. They forget that most of these areas were annexed to the Russian state only after the seventeenth century. For example, to the Armenians, whose ancient kingdom accepted Christianity in 301, and who spent centuries under Turkish and Persian rule, their connection with Russia is merely one episode in a long and complicated history. For that matter, Western Ukraine was never part of the Russian Empire and was only incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1939-44. Yet the widespread view that the Soviet Union is a Russian nation-state, and not an imperial conglomerate similar to Habsburg Austria-Hungary, remains dominant even in American foreign policy circles.

In addition, strong biases against “fragmentation” exist among Americans, who derive their attitudes about the Soviet Union from the experience of the United States. Instead of sympathizing with groups in the Soviet republics who seek to transform the Lithuanian SSR or Georgian SSR into independent nation-states, many Americans consider the Soviet republics as comparable to the American

states. They believe that just as the ethnic groups of the United States have adopted English and have merged into one American people, so the “ethnic” groups of the USSR should adopt Russian.

The enchantment of many Americans with the great Russian literature and music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries makes the American wonder what strange force possesses the Estonian to reject this world-renowned culture and identity. The success of Russian cultural and educational figures in academic and cultural communities creates an atmosphere often unsympathetic to non-Russian demands. The exotic myth of powerful Holy Russia and the Russian soul overshadows any interest that Americans might have about the Azerbaijani or Moldavian-Rumanian culture. Even the dramatic and acrobatic Georgian and Ukrainian dance groups are labeled Russian by impresarios who wish to capitalize on the popularity of all things Russian.

The use of the label “Russian” for people as different as the Western-oriented, Finnic-speaking Protestant Estonians, the Turkic-speaking Muslim Uzbeks, and the Romance-language speaking Moldavian-Rumanians has impoverished Americans’ appreciation of the cultures and histories of the Soviet peoples, and has rendered Americans incapable of understanding social and political developments in the USSR. Since the last Soviet census indicated that non-Russians are approaching majority status in the Soviet Union, Americans are out of touch with half the population of the other superpower. The American experience in Indochina demonstrated the danger of ignorance about other parts of the world—a costly lesson that shouldn’t have to be repeated. With the percentage of non-Russians increasing in the Soviet Union, the balance of power may shift in the USSR, and Russian attempts to retain dominance may lead to an explosive situation. As the Turkic-speaking population of the USSR increases dramatically, how many foreign policy advisors understand Uzbek political and cultural traditions and how many American academics study Kirgiz?

Limited knowledge about the non-Russians



Union of Republics of the USSR

- 1 Armenian S.S.R.
- 2 Azerbaijanian S.S.R.
- 3 Belorussian S.S.R.
- 4 Estonian S.S.R.
- 5 Georgian S.S.R.
- 6 Kazakh S.S.R.
- 7 Kirgiz S.S.R.
- 8 Latvian S.S.R.
- 9 Lithuanian S.S.R.
- 10 Moldavian S.S.R.
- 11 Russian R.F.S.S.R.
- 12 Tadzhik S.S.R.
- 13 Turkmen S.S.R.
- 14 Ukrainian S.S.R.
- 15 Uzbek S.S.R.

Nationalities of the USSR in 1979

Nationality	Population
Armenians	4,151,241
Azerbaijanis	5,477,330
Belorussians	9,462,715
Estonians	1,019,851
Georgians	3,570,504
Germans	1,936,214
Jews	1,810,876
Kazakhs	6,556,442
Kirgiz	1,906,271
Latvians	1,439,037
Lithuanians	2,850,905
Moldavians	2,968,224
Russians	137,397,089
Tadzhik	2,897,697
Tatars	6,317,468
Turkmen	2,027,913
Ukrainians	42,347,387
Uzbeks	12,455,978
Other nationalities	15,491,512

in the USSR also blinds Americans to the human and national rights issues in the USSR. No one would maintain that the life or freedom of a Russian dissident in Moscow is worth more than that of a Lithuanian Catholic in Vilnius or a Ukrainian writer in Kiev. Yet, because of a lack of understanding of Lithuanian and Ukrainian affairs, the Western press minimizes the importance of such "provincial" movements, which allows the Soviet regime much more latitude for repression.

American insensitivity to national differences in the USSR also offends the dignity of a substantial number of Americans of Armenian, Belorussian, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Rumanian-Moldavian, and Ukrainian descent. Many editors of reference works have dismissed the indignant letters of Lithuanian-Americans or Ukrainian-Americans as expressions emigré politics. Editors and educators continue referring to "Kiev, Russia" or "Russian dancers from Vilnius," without even considering that the letters they receive may lodge justifiable complaints.

The Remedy. The situation can be improved by a careful campaign for a new atmosphere of understanding. Educators should emphasize the cultural and national diversity of the Soviet Union in their geography and history lessons. Audio-visual materials should be used to impress students with the heterogeneity in art, architecture, religion, and social patterns of the nations of the Soviet Union. American ethnic groups should be utilized as sources of information on Armenian architecture, Lithuanian literature, and Jewish religious traditions. All too often ethnic communities are reduced to the level of quaint suppliers of ethnic food and folk dancing.

Editors, reporters and television personnel should receive careful instructions from their employers explaining the need for exactness when describing the Soviet Union. Simply by using "Soviet" and "Soviet Union" when referring to the USSR and its entire population, media people can avoid incorrect statements. Rather than just writing angry letters, ethnic groups should conduct an organized program of supplying information about their ancestral homelands.

The process will be a long one, since bad habits are difficult to uproot. Only by tolerance and understanding can the problem be resolved without confrontations. The result will be a deeper understanding of the Soviet Union and its cultures and a better basis for American-Soviet relations.

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For Further Reading

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