Ethnicity, National Integration, and Education in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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...the disappearance of nations would impoverish us not less than if all men should become alike, with one personality and one face. Nations are the wealth of mankind, its generalized personalities; the least among them has its own coloration and harbors within itself a unique facet of God’s design.

Aleksander Solzhenitsyn
(Dunlop, 1985, p. 566).

The problem of ethnicity occupies a special significance in the internal politics of the Soviet Union. The Russians are in a majority in the country by only a small margin. Other groups, Central Asians in particular, with higher birth rates, may outnumber the former in not too distant a future (Matuszewski, 1982, pp. 76-82).

The Soviet Union contains over one hundred ethnic groups called nationalities, most of which are quite small. From a political standpoint, there are only about a dozen ethnic groups that deserve consideration (Kolack, 1985, pp. 125-132). These are: (1) Ukrainians and Belorussians who are Slavs, are akin to the Russians, and belong to the Orthodox Church; (2) the Muslims who nearly all are Sunni by religion and Turkic by racial and linguistic affinity; (3) the two major Caucasian groups—Georgians and Armenians—that are close to Muslims: in culture but Christian by faith; (4) the Jes; (5) the three Baltic nationalities; and (6) a number of West European and East Asian groups, among whom the Germans are perhaps the most important. The first five categories account for nearly 85 percent of the non-Russians in the Soviet Union (Bohmann, 1981, pp. 199-204).

Over the years, the number of ethnic groups has decreased as the smaller ones tend to assimilate into the larger ones either because of cultural similarity

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or geographical proximity (Anderson, 1983, pp. 465-470). Russification has been effective among the Ukrainians, Belorussians, Jews, and the West European groups. However, its progress has been slow among the Central Asian Muslims whose number is increasing as a result of high fertility rate, who possess a strong sense of religious solidarity, who are characterized by a distinct ethnic identity, who are increasingly becoming politically conscious, and who are encouraged by ceaseless propaganda from abroad to revolt against the Russians and the Soviet Union (Karklins, 1986, pp. 83-89).

Russians, from the earliest times, have been a migratory people, moving to the outlying regions of the country, particularly to the south and southeast, in search of congenial climate and natural resources (Mazur, 1981, pp. 460-461). They have been in competition with the local people and have been regarded as intruders and predators (Motyl, 1987, pp. 24-30). In the early years of the Soviet regime, the nationalities were offered many concessions, short of political independence, to compensate for the right of self-determination and secession from the Union as provided in the Communist Party manifesto (Kolmakova, 1986, pp. 20-25). But, since the time of Stalin, the nationalities came under tighter control of the central government. The question of nationalities is becoming increasingly ominous because of the continuing decline of the Russians and rise of the ethnic minorities in the population composition of the country (Rowland, 1982, pp. 563-569). The gradual depletion of resources may generate tensions among the groups, intensify their national sentiments, and strengthen their resolve to protect their perceived interests.

I. The Ethnic Groups

The main ethnic groups that are racially, culturally, religiously, or linguistically distinct from one another, and are represented in significant numbers in the Soviet population are the following (Horak, 1982, pp. 7-26; Rockett, 1981, pp. 10-56):

The Russians

The total area of the USSR is 22.4 million square kilometers with a population of approximately 270 million. The Russians are the largest ethnic group in the country, with 52.88 percent of the total population. Nearly 83.50 percent of them live in the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR), the largest Union republic, comprising about 17.00 million square kilometers or 76 percent of the total area. The concentration of Russians in the RSFSR is gradually declining because of the policy of the Soviet govern-