

Editorial Note: "Whither the Soviet Union?"

This issue is the third in the annual series of *Nationalities Papers* (in cooperation with the Program on Nationality and Siberian Studies of the W. Averell Harriman Institute for Advanced Study of the Soviet Union at Columbia University) reviewing and assessing continuing republican assertiveness and ethnic nationalism in the USSR.

The increasing speed and rising number of events generated in the last three years by these two interrelated phenomena have placed them stage center in the drama of the redistribution of power between the once all-powerful center and its previously compliant periphery. Without doubt we are witnessing the devolution of Lenin's Soviet Union. No serious student of the Soviet empire can now claim to comprehend fully its domestic scene without possessing a firm grasp of and respect for the dynamics of republicanism and ethnopolitics presently at work in every segment of the Union's multinational population.

That the nationality movements had become principal actors in the era of perestroika, protagonists in their own right, was tersely expressed in the title of the first (1989) special issue of *Nationalities Papers*, "The Soviet Nationalities and Gorbachev." By 1990, their agendas openly conflicted with those of Gorbachev, hence the title, "The Soviet Nationalities against Gorbachev." A year later, by mid-1991, the increasingly anti-union republican drives for autonomy, sovereignty, secession, and full independence continue despite Gorbachev's fierce struggle to preserve the Union. Despite his efforts, he no longer holds our sole attention; political personalities, once obscure and unknown, now demand our recognition: names such as Gamsakhurdia, Gorbunovs, Landsbergis, Nazarbaev, Ruutel, Snegur, and Ter-Petrosyan, and, of course, Yeltsin are beginning to push that of President Gorbachev aside, despite his obstructive tactics, despite his array of official titles and access to state power.

Clearly the collective political future envisioned by the individual republics and their various ethnic groups will not be a revamped union—a la Gorbachev. The momentum of the last twelve months points unambiguously towards further fragmentation, despite Gorbachev's previous assertions and reassertions of central power to stem or at least slow down the erosion of Lenin's imperium by wave after wave of ethnic republican separatist activity. Despite threats, pleas, and cajoling on the part of Gorbachev; despite state-imposed boycotts, Macchiavellian manipulations,

media control, and naked military intervention, the nationalities have steadily scored victory after victory.

And what of the coming year? Whither the Soviet Union? According to several contributors, 1991-1992 may prove to be the year when ethnic minorities within the republics also become major players. Already the Abkhazians, the Gagauz, and the Yakuts—and, at the time of this writing, the Crimean Tatars—not to mention ethnic Russian minorities, have taken significant steps to protect their interests. The multinationalism of the republics may be a central theme by next year, prompting a title “Soviet Nationalities versus Soviet Nationalities.”

In this issue, the editors welcome a prominent veteran of the nationalities question, John A. Armstrong, who has been invited to provide an overall critique of the views expressed in the series of three special issues of *Nationalities Papers*. Once again it has been a pleasure to co-edit with my colleague Professor Alexander Motyl, the Director of the Program on Nationality and Siberian Studies. As usual, *Nationalities Papers*, is grateful for all the generous and cordial cooperation it has received from the W. Averell Harriman Institute for Advanced Study of the Soviet Union at Columbia University, as well as the ongoing support of the Simon H. Rifkin Center for the Humanities of the Division of Humanities of the City College of New York.

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