



Familiar **STRANGERS**

The Georgian Diaspora
and the
EVOLUTION OF SOVIET EMPIRE

ERIK R. SCOTT

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To Keeli and Sabina

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My fascination with the Georgian diaspora began during my first visit to Moscow as an undergraduate student, when I was struck by the profoundly multiethnic character of the former Soviet capital. Clearly, there was more to Russia than ethnic Russians, and, among non-Russians, Georgians stood out in intriguing ways. The irresistible appeal of Georgian cuisine and a retrospective of Soviet Georgian films at Moscow's Museum of Cinema only deepened my interest. While this book is a historical study of migration and diaspora, it is also the product of my subsequent travels in Russia and Georgia in pursuit of this interest and the relationships forged along the way.

Even before graduate school, I was fortunate to have a wonderful series of mentors. At Brown University, Pat Herlihy introduced me to the major questions of Russian and Soviet history, including the "national question" that preoccupied nineteenth-century intellectuals, was forcefully addressed by Bolshevik revolutionaries, and remains at the forefront of Russian politics today. In Washington, DC, Martha Brill Olcott shared her knowledge of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and Louise Shelly gave me an unforgettable opportunity to work in Georgia from 2002 to 2004.

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While I bear sole responsibility for the final product, this book would not have been possible without the support I received from the Berkeley Department of History, the Berkeley Program in Eurasian and East European Studies, the Department of Education's Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship, the Alan Sharlin Memorial Award, the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Grant, the Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellowship, the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research's Title VIII Travel Grant, the American Philosophical Society's Franklin Research Grant, and the Vice Chancellor for Research Book Publication Award of the University of Kansas. A postdoctoral fellowship at Georgetown University's Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies and a Title VIII Research Fellowship at the Kennan Institute gave me the time I needed to revise my manuscript. Since arriving at the University of Kansas in 2012, I have been surrounded by supportive colleagues who have helped me develop as a historian. I am particularly grateful to Luis Corteguera, Sheyda Jahanbani, and Nathan Wood for their guidance, advice, and mentorship. I would also like to thank Jon Giullian of the University of Kansas Libraries and Darin Grauberger, Travis White, and the University of Kansas Cartographic Services for the maps.

Before my travels even began, my parents nurtured my intellectual interests, and my grandparents gave me an intimate understanding of our own family's experience of migration and diaspora by sharing stories of their life in a small Italian village. Later on, my family supported my decision to go to graduate school, and my parents, grandparents, sister,

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND DATING

In the interest of simplicity, I use a modified version of the Library of Congress system to render Georgian names and words in Latin characters. I forego diacritics and special characters in the hope that the resulting transliteration will be more easily pronounced by non-Georgian speakers but still recognizable to those familiar with the language. Although Georgian does not use capital letters, I have capitalized personal names while transliterating them from their original language (rather than from their Russianized version). Accordingly, Stalin's given name appears as Ioseb Jughashvili rather than Iosif Dzhughashvili.

In transliterating Russian names and words, I adhere to the Library of Congress system, with the exception of recognizable names in general usage (e.g., Trotsky rather than Trotskii). For the sake of brevity, I often refer to Soviet republics by their shortened name, which reflects contemporary usage (e.g., Georgia rather than the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic). While the official name of Georgia's capital changed from Tiflis to the more Georgianized Tbilisi in 1936, I use the latter name throughout.

Dates are given in their chronological and geographic context. Events taking place in Russia and Georgia before February 1, 1918 are provided in the Julian calendar (thirteen days behind the calendar used in the West); those occurring afterward are given in the Gregorian calendar.

Familiar Strangers



The Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic





The Caucasus in the Soviet Union

Introduction

If any single moment can be considered the high point of Soviet history, it occurred when Soviet soldiers raised the Red Flag over the Reichstag on May 1, 1945. The event signaled the defeat of German fascism after a costly war and portended a new era of international relations redefined by the Soviet Union's emergence as a global superpower. Two soldiers in particular were credited with this defining achievement, their images appearing in Soviet newspapers and subsequently reprinted in school textbooks. The Russian Mikhail Egorov represented the largest nation in the Soviet Union, while the Georgian Meliton Kantaria stood for the victory of a multiethnic state and society.¹ Yet this was not the only historical juncture at which a Georgian appeared at the forefront of Soviet life.

Georgians occupied a central role at each stage of the Soviet Union's evolution, from establishment to dissolution. Joseph Stalin, born Ioseb Jughashvili, was just one of a group of Georgian revolutionaries who came to power in the early years of Soviet rule and directed the development of the new state. After the socialist state was established Soviet citizens sought new opportunities for leisure and consumption, and they found them at the Georgian restaurant, where they adopted the distinctive rituals of the Georgian table. During the "Thaw" that followed Stalin's death, Georgian cultural entrepreneurs embodied the era's spirit of spontaneity as popular though recognizably ethnic entertainers specializing in song and dance. As official life grew stagnant under Leonid Brezhnev, Georgians thrived in the burgeoning informal economy. Finally, with the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms, it was a

Georgian film, *Repentance* (*monanieba*), that explored the furthest limits of allowable expression, calling into question the very legitimacy of Soviet power.

Georgians were the multiethnic Soviet empire's most familiar strangers. They moved beyond their native republic in the Caucasus to gain imperial prominence in Moscow, yet remained a distinctive national community. They were a diaspora defined by ethnic difference, yet one internal to the Soviet Union. Georgians employed strangeness in ways that met the demands of the Soviet state, but they did so largely for their own benefit. They succeeded because their cultural repertoire emphasized recognizable difference, because their networks stretched beyond the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) to intersect with central institutions, and because their homeland was firmly within Soviet borders, able to provide a steady supply of ideologically sanctioned cultural and material resources. Georgians had a distinct set of skills and a cultivated mythology that fit those skills. The Soviet authorities used, promoted, and sometimes resented Georgian success, while Georgians capitalized on it, negotiating between imperial prominence and local self-assertion.

At first glance, this story of Georgian diasporic success might seem unlikely. After all, Georgians were one of over one hundred officially classified Soviet nationalities. Numbering just under four million, they made up less than 2 percent of the overall Soviet population.² Their homeland, the Georgian SSR, was a small territory located far from Moscow, beyond the towering mountains of the Caucasus range. While the Georgians were historically Orthodox Christians, for most of their history they had been more closely linked to the Ottoman and Persian empires than to Russia. Their non-Slavic language was completely unrelated to Russian and written in a unique alphabet indecipherable to most Soviet citizens. Yet these factors make the prominence they achieved in the Soviet context even more intriguing.

This book's premise is that the history of the Georgian diaspora cannot be understood without a thorough reconceptualization of the Soviet empire. While previous scholars have made a convincing case for understanding the Soviet state as an empire because it expanded across vast territory, exerted its authority over an ethnically defined periphery, and



Figure I.1 Georgian soldier Meliton Kantaria (left) holding the Soviet Banner of Victory alongside Russian soldier Mikhail Egorov (right) after the pair raised the flag over the Reichstag in Berlin. Russian State Archive of Film and Photo Documents.

ruled through difference, the Soviet Union was not simply a federation of nationalities confined to titular republics. Instead, it was an empire of mobile diasporas that transcended the borders of the republics, intermixed, and helped construct a truly multiethnic society. The state's treatment of its myriad nationalities was rarely equitable, but non-Russians could and did exploit the state's dependence on national difference. By reimagining the Soviet Union as an empire defined by its diasporas, this book recasts imperial subjects as imperial agents.

It also makes the case for a broader understanding of diaspora, a term describing an ethnic community that lives beyond its homeland yet maintains a collective sense of identity over time.³ Departing from prior scholarship on diaspora and the established trends of Soviet historiography, this book contends that homelands can also be internal to empire and expands the concept of diaspora to include nationalities in the Soviet Union living beyond their titular republics.⁴ It argues that by enabling the internal migration of diverse populations but upholding

a system in which national identity was based on descent, the Soviet Union engendered and perpetuated a diverse range of diasporic groups who were seen, and most often saw themselves, as nationally distinctive even as they remained Soviet citizens. While some scholars have argued for a more limited application of the concept of diaspora, there is no other term that so clearly underscores the fact that life as a member of one of these communities was shaped by the experience of being, at least in some sense, a stranger.⁵

These internal groups differed from more commonly studied diasporas in important ways, suggesting the need for a new typology. Unlike Jews or Armenians, Georgians were not heirs to a long diaspora tradition. They were rapidly transformed from rooted agriculturalists into mobile urban specialists within the context of the Soviet empire, and their dispersal arguably had more to do with imperial opportunity than national trauma. While Georgian migrants drew on preexisting cultural practices and pursued their own interests, the Soviet state helped fund and produce their diasporic identity. In contrast to more typical diasporas, Georgians and other groups that this book describes as familiar strangers tended to place greater emphasis on the outward performance of national difference, using otherness as a strategy to manage the terms of their imperial integration.

Although the Georgians described in this book came from diverse backgrounds, held divergent opinions, and did not always think of themselves as a unified community, all of them came to the fore as Georgians beyond Georgia and performed their own nationality at important moments in Soviet history. Their Georgianness was a historical artifact: a visible, audible, and edible repertoire of familiar strangeness forged at the intersection of national and imperial culture. This repertoire, composed of practices, symbols, texts, and modes of self-presentation, was the subject of internal debates among the diaspora even as it was externally oriented for the purposes of Soviet empire. Admittedly, this book does not look equally at all Georgians but focuses on those who gained widespread prominence in Moscow as a way of explaining the leading role that non-Russian diasporas played at the heart of the Soviet empire.

Beginning in the final years of imperial Russia and continuing through the collapse of the Soviet Union, this book uses the Georgian

story to explore the evolution of the multiethnic Soviet state and the accompanying transformation of Soviet society. Chapter 1 provides the theoretical framework and discusses the historiographical consequences of this *longue durée* approach, reimagining the Soviet Union as an empire of diasporas, examining the Georgians in comparison with other diasporas within and beyond Soviet borders, and describing the creation of a domestic internationalism that brought opportunities as well as risks for groups like the Georgians. Subsequent chapters proceed chronologically, each looking at Georgian prominence in a different realm of Soviet life at a time when that aspect of Soviet life was most relevant. These chapters should be understood as episodic, rather than comprehensive, though together they offer a perspective on Soviet history as a whole.

Chapter 2 traces an entire generation of Georgian revolutionaries from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s, following their advancement from the Caucasus to the Kremlin. Looking at how the Russian Revolution was made largely by non-Russians, the chapter brings to light the so-called Caucasian group, of which Joseph Stalin was the leading member. In so doing, it considers what made Georgian political networks different and in some ways more effective than those of other groups competing for power in the Soviet state. Chapter 3 continues this examination from a culinary perspective, looking at Stalin as a Georgian *tamada* (toastmaster)-in-chief who conducted business around banquet tables in the Kremlin laden with the food and drink of his homeland. It follows the dissemination of Georgian dishes and wines, accompanied by distinct dining and drinking rituals, from the upper echelons of Soviet power to the broader Soviet public. It tells the story of the creation of a multiethnic Soviet diet and explains how it was that of all the diverse cuisines in the Soviet Union, Georgian food and drink went farthest in conquering the Soviet table.

Chapter 4 looks at the redefinition of Georgian culture after Stalin's death. Freed from Stalinist constraints but benefiting from several decades of institutional development, Georgian artists and entertainers seized upon new opportunities for cultural entrepreneurship created by the Thaw. Shifting to the subsequent period typically characterized as one of stagnation (*zastoi*), Chapter 5 looks below the surface to consider the vital role Georgians played in the expanding informal economy. In

this sphere the Georgian diaspora was a numerically small but dominant group, ubiquitous in markets throughout the Soviet Union yet rooted in the increasingly assertive Georgian SSR. They provided the goods necessary for the continued functioning of the Soviet economy, but had an uneasy relationship with the imperial state.

Chapter 6 explores how Georgian success bred discontent with the restrictions that Soviet rule placed on professional advancement and cultural expression. While the preceding chapters consider skillful performances of Georgian otherness, this chapter reveals the Georgian intelligentsia's mastery of the universal language of Soviet high culture and their emergent critique of the limitations of Soviet empire. Of all Soviet cinematic traditions, Georgian film perhaps best portrayed the stifled sentiments of late Soviet intellectual life. Although they had been nurtured by the Soviet state, the ambitions of Georgia's sizable intelligentsia eventually provoked a forceful movement against the empire by the end of the 1980s.

While many Georgians embraced independence in 1991, the Georgian diaspora succeeded not despite, but because of the relatively closed, domestically diverse nature of the Soviet empire. With the empire's collapse, Georgians faced new dilemmas as they were transformed from an internal Soviet group into a transnational population living across state borders.⁶ The story of their success and its limitations illuminates the intertwined history of empire and diaspora, both in Eurasia and beyond.

An Empire of Diasporas

Over one thousand miles lay between the expansive balconies and tiled roofs of the Georgian capital of Tbilisi and the walls and towers of Moscow's Kremlin. The most direct path led past the ancient city of Mtskheta and the medieval fortress of Ananuri, then along a winding road reaching from verdant valleys to the slopes of snow-capped Mount Kazbek, and finally through the Darial Gorge, where the powerful Terek River cut through the Caucasus mountain range and imperial Russia had moved earth and resettled populations to complete its Georgian Military Highway. As Russia consolidated its rule over the Caucasus in the nineteenth century, tsarist officials, administrators, and soldiers from the north traveled the Georgian Military Highway. So, too, did imperial Russia's leading literary figures—authors such as Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov—rendering the picturesque and polyglot Caucasus on the page for millions of Russian readers.

The road also brought visitors from the south. Following the absorption of their homeland into the Russian Empire, a new generation of Georgians traveled the Georgian Military Highway to pursue education in Russian universities. They were known in Georgian as the *terg-daleulebi*, “Terek-drinkers,” who crossed the mighty river and returned home having imbibed the latest intellectual currents of Moscow and St. Petersburg.¹ Future generations followed their path northward, though by the late nineteenth century they were more likely to return home as committed socialists. They crossed and recrossed the mountainous Caucasus, cultivating a distinctive national identity in a Russian

context and seeking the transformation of their homeland upon return. For Georgians, Russia became a pathway to European modernity; it provided models and categories that could be applied to Georgian realities and integrated with preexisting Georgian practices, producing a conception of nationality and a repertoire of cultural performance that fused national consciousness with imperial awareness.

In 1921, after a short period of independence, Georgia was invaded by socialist Russia's Red Army, with a coterie of Georgian Bolsheviks leading the charge. Under Soviet power, the distance separating the two nations in effect grew smaller. It was traversed by new roads and tunnels dug through the mountains, serviced by expanded ports and ferry lines on the Black Sea, and connected by railroad tracks and flight paths. More significantly, Soviet rule entailed changes in ideology as well as infrastructure. In pursuit of its socialist mission, the Soviet Union sought to



Figure 1.1 A photograph taken along the Georgian Military Highway in the late nineteenth century, showing the Darial Gorge and the Terek River. This narrow mountain pass was the main crossing between Russia and Georgia. Library of Congress.

thoroughly transform the relationship between the metropole and the peoples of imperial Russia's former colonies.

While other empires relied on diasporas, Georgians achieved exceptional prominence in the Soviet Union because they were able to exploit the needs of a unique state that ruled through nationality (*natsional'nost'*) and defined itself as presiding over a multiethnic country (*mnogonatsional'naia strana*).² An internal Georgian diaspora skillfully navigated between the Caucasus and the Kremlin, blending the national and the imperial in ways that spoke for a diverse polity. Their arrival in the center of Soviet life reflected the revolution's dramatic mobilization of non-Russian nationalities and the new opportunities Moscow offered for advancement. Among non-Russian residents in the Soviet capital Georgians were far from the largest group, but their overrepresentation in important political, cultural, and economic roles gave them a prominence far beyond their numerically small population, which at its high point in 1989 officially reached only 19,608. By contrast, there were 252,670 Ukrainians, 174,728 Jews, 73,005 Belarussians, 43,989 Armenians, and 20,727 Azeris living in Moscow by that time.³ Granted, tabulating official registration in Moscow was only one way of counting communities that were highly mobile and did not always take up permanent residence or register with the relevant authorities.⁴ However, it was also important that in the roles they came to occupy Georgians tended to perform their national repertoire loudly and colorfully, coming to the fore as pan-imperial specialists of otherness.

The vast literature on Soviet nationalities has tended to overlook their mobility, focusing instead on nationality and nationalism within national republics. This tendency is perhaps understandable, since historians focused their attention on the importance of non-Russian populations around the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union into fifteen independent national republics.⁵ New histories were written for the emergent post-Soviet nations; at the same time, nationalism and the nation-state were the subjects of widespread scholarly inquiry.⁶ As nationality was examined in a variety of national contexts, scholars reached a new understanding of the Soviet state as a maker, rather than a breaker, of nations.⁷ They began to describe this state as a peculiar type of empire, a centralizing polity that nevertheless promoted non-Russian

nations in earnest. Terry Martin considered the administration of what he termed the “affirmative action empire,” mainly from the perspective of policymakers in Moscow.⁸ Drawing on the theories of Benedict Anderson, Francine Hirsch examined how ethnographic knowledge was employed by the state to organize and rule the Soviet “empire of nations.”⁹ These works reflected a broader historiographical fascination with empire that had its parallels in the study of Russia’s imperial past, where scholars attempted to place the tsarist empire in the context of European colonial empires.¹⁰ Framing the history of nationalities in a broader imperial setting, it seemed, was a way of moving away from separate historical accounts written for each nationality, a welcome departure from what Benjamin Nathans justly criticized as the “one people after another approach.”¹¹ Yet these studies of multiethnic empire continued to highlight the way the Soviet state grounded nationalities in titular republics by language, cultural institutions, and the process of local cadre promotion known as *korenizatsiia*. These were important factors, to be sure, but their emphasis obscured the extent to which the Soviet Union also stimulated movement across the internal borders of the national republics. Left untreated was the diasporic experience that defined life for millions in the Soviet empire.

The Soviet state contained a broad array of diaspora populations. Some, like the Germans, Greeks, or Jews after the establishment of Israel in 1948, were linked in real or imagined ways to homelands abroad and were viewed with ideological suspicion.¹² Others, like the Kurds and Roma (Gypsies), had ethnic ties to communities in neighboring states but no internationally recognized homeland, existing uneasily in the Soviet context without a clear territorial basis.¹³ A third category, one that has received almost no attention, consisted of internal diasporas, nationalities with assigned territories in the Soviet Union who traveled outside their titular homelands and often gained prominence in the center.¹⁴ This category encompassed a diverse set of communities, including an Armenian population that was already widely dispersed in 1917, but also Ukrainians, Kazakhs, Tajiks, and others who left their homelands for the first time to serve in the Red Army, work at industrial sites, and settle in Russian cities. To varying degrees, internal diaspora

groups maintained distinctive identities, yet their members remained integral citizens of a larger multiethnic state.

Internal diasporas differed from other types of diasporas in ways that illuminate the politics and practice of nationality in the Soviet Union. Members of these communities left their homelands and crossed republic-level borders without leaving Soviet territory; as a result, they could move back and forth with ease between homeland and host society. Yet while their ethnic distinctiveness was officially promoted, they were generally prohibited from organizing politically as diasporas beyond the borders of their native republics.¹⁵ Lacking official representation as communities beyond their homelands, they were not classified by Soviet bureaucrats as diasporas, and they were only obliquely noted in census records as nationalities residing outside their titular republics; for these reasons, they have generally been ignored by historians. However, the presence of these outsider communities was felt in every aspect of Soviet life, from the marketplace, to the theatrical stage, to the restaurant menu. While some scholars have called for an approach to empire that “transcends ethnicity,” a glimpse at the history of internal diasporas reveals that nationality in the Soviet Union was far more than a fixed administrative or ethnographic classification confined to the national republics.¹⁶ National categories transcended territory, interacted, and in some cases blended together. Rather than casting nationality aside because of the limited ways it has been studied, the concept needs to be reconsidered and set in motion.

This chapter argues for internal diaspora as a way of exploring the mobile dimensions of nationality within the Soviet empire and introduces three related concepts to reimagine the internal diversity of the Soviet state in a global comparative context. The first, the idea of the Soviet Union as an empire of diasporas, looks at the Soviet state in comparison with other empires; the second, the notion of the Georgians as familiar strangers, describes the range of cultural strategies available to diaspora populations and places the Georgians alongside diasporas within and beyond the Soviet Union; the third concept, domestic internationalism, provides a perspective on the evolving dialogue between the Soviet empire and its diverse populations.

The Soviet Union and Other Empires

The Soviet Union was rather a peculiar imperial state; it was avowedly anti-imperialist in its ideology, and its leaders often denounced racial and ethnic hierarchies.¹⁷ Yet the Soviet state ultimately privileged the center over the periphery, and a politically enlightened Communist Party, with its central institutions in the capital, over the rest of society. It was a state heavily engaged in what historians Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper call the “politics of difference,” an imperial mode that contrasts with the nation-state’s emphasis on homogeneity and lateral ties.¹⁸ Like other empires, the Soviet Union ruled through hierarchically organized heterogeneity, expanded to absorb new territories, and subordinated an ethnically defined periphery to the metropole.¹⁹ However, the Georgian experience suggests that the Soviet Union was a state where the periphery may have been defined ethnically, but the national core was ambiguous and poorly articulated. At its center was not a single nation, but rather a mixture of diasporas.

In this sense, the Soviet Union was never truly a Russian empire. While Russian was the Soviet Union’s default language and Russians gained a representational prominence after the Second World War, Russians were neither the most prosperous, nor the most educated, nor most successful group in the USSR.²⁰ While there were more Russians than other nationalities, they still made up only 50 percent of the Soviet Union’s overall population.²¹ The Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) notably lacked the trappings of statehood accorded the other republics. It was the only Soviet republic that did not have its own Communist Party and Academy of Sciences, and, as a federation, it was composed of a patchwork of regional and ethno-territorial units inhabited by groups as diverse as Tatars, Chechens, and Finns.

The heart of the Soviet empire was Moscow, an imperial rather than a national capital. In the Soviet period, the Russian city was reinvented as a self-consciously multiethnic metropolis. Its streets were marked with the names and heroes of the non-Russian socialist republics, and a Georgian visitor could find the familiar in a visit to Moscow’s historic Georgian Square, or a drive along the capital’s Rustaveli Street.²² The city played host to countless political gatherings, cultural events, youth

festivals, and academic conferences that showcased internal diasporas from the national republics. Moscow's own political elite was multiethnic and composed of upwardly mobile cadres from the periphery; its culinary tastes favored a multiethnic smorgasbord of national cuisines; its cultural life celebrated the art, music, and theater of the national republics; and its marketplaces featured their goods, often sold by conspicuously non-Russian traders. Political, cultural, and economic life in the Soviet metropole was constructed out of a mixture of national cultures drawn from the Soviet periphery. The Kremlin and Red Square evoked the city's Russian past, but Moscow stood for many things: Russia, certainly, in its various historical incarnations, but also the peoples and places of a diverse empire.



Figure 1.2 The unveiling of the monument to Russian–Georgian friendship in Moscow in 1983, photographed from a nearby balcony. The monument featured intertwined Georgian and Russian letters and towered over a central Moscow neighborhood, marking the Soviet capital as a multiethnic space. Central State Archive of the City of Moscow, Division for the Preservation of Audio-Visual Documents of Moscow.

The Soviet Union was by no means the first empire to grant a prominent place to its diasporas, though perhaps no other empire was so thoroughly defined by its ethnic minorities. The Byzantine Empire, like most imperial states before it, relied on ethnically distinct outsiders to bolster its military.²³ The Spanish Empire employed Swiss mercenaries, along with German technicians, Maltese merchants, and Genoese sailors, and was ruled at its height by the Hapsburgs, a supranational Catholic dynasty.²⁴ The creation of Britain entailed the absorption of Scottish and Welsh populations, who often maintained their distinctive identities and professed unique religious denominations even as they came to serve as the empire's leading military officers, administrators, educators, and industrialists.²⁵ Britain, like many other empires, also relied on a host of local intermediaries and service minorities in the new areas it conquered, among them polyglot Parsi traders in Hong Kong and peripatetic Greek merchants in the Levant.²⁶

All of these empires created opportunities for specialized diasporas, who pursued their own agendas within an imperial framework. Empires facilitated widespread migration, not only horizontally between metropole and colony, but also laterally from one colony to another. The Catholic Irish, though arguably colonized at home, traveled in large numbers to India, as well as to North America and the West Indies, almost immediately after these territories came under British rule.²⁷ Racial ideology deprived Indians of many rights and played a key role in the exploitative use of Indian labor in eastern and southern Africa; however, once transported to British-controlled Africa, Indian migrants established themselves as a critically important commercial community and preserved Hindu and Muslim religious traditions in diaspora.²⁸

Like the Spanish Empire, Britain had a monarch at its center, though after the French Revolution, dynastic empires had to contend with calls for popular sovereignty, both from their core and from the furthest reaches of their imperial domains. One strategy of multiethnic states in the modern age was to promote an assimilationist concept of imperial citizenship, as France did, which held the promise of universalism, even if in practice it partially or fully excluded groups on the basis of race and gender.²⁹ Another strategy was to simultaneously tolerate and constrain nations within imperial borders, as was undertaken

in nineteenth-century Austria-Hungary. There, the Hapsburg dynasty strengthened its central bureaucracy and brandished its Catholic identity, while at the same time cultivating ties with Protestant, Orthodox Christian, and even Jewish populations.³⁰

The Soviet Union was not a dynastic empire, though it bore a special resemblance to the past empires of Eurasia, a broad but interconnected geographic area.³¹ Eurasian empires excelled at ruling religiously and ethnically diverse populations, and many of them encompassed the same national groups that the Soviets would later govern. They were not maritime empires, like the vast British overseas empire, but land empires, where borders were not so easily defined geographically, and the separation between center and periphery was even more difficult to establish. To a greater degree than empires based in Western Europe, Eurasian empires lacked a clearly defined ethnic and racial core; as a result, they typically created as many opportunities in the center for skilled outsiders as they did for members of their numerically dominant nation. As the preeminent historian of imperial Russia, V. O. Kliuchevskii, famously noted, colonization may have been “the basic fact of Russian history,” but the history of Russia was that of “a country that colonizes itself.”³²

The Soviet Union was in many ways similar to the Russian Empire that preceded it, and not only because both shared roughly the same borders and occupied the same position on the Eurasian landmass. Both were expressly multiethnic states with a universalizing ideology, rather than a nation, at their center. The Russian Empire, which some proclaimed as the “Third Rome,” accorded a privileged place to Orthodox Christianity and sometimes promoted Russification, but also accommodated religious and ethnic diversity and was ruled by a transnational dynastic elite.³³ The Soviet Union’s inheritance from the state that preceded it was not merely geographic; it also included longer-term practices of imperial management and established repertoires of national distinctiveness.

Imperial Russia’s Eurasian neighbor, the Ottoman Empire, followed many of the same practices. The Ottoman state did not define itself as Turkish, but proclaimed an encompassing dynastic and Islamic identity while granting protection and reaching a range of special deals with religiously and linguistically diverse populations living in the sultan’s domain.³⁴ As was the case with Russians in the Russian Empire, Turks

in the Ottoman Empire were the numerically dominant nationality, yet they had no trappings of national statehood. Both Russians and Turks were predominantly rural and in many cases underrepresented in key areas of imperial life, including commerce and imperial administration. Instead of displaying the dominance of a core nationality, Eurasian empires featured a range of ethnically distinct imperial specialists. The Ottoman Empire had its Armenian, Greek, and Jewish commercial elites, and its imperial bureaucracy and military were staffed by descendants of slaves taken from the Balkans and the Caucasus.³⁵ In the same fashion, the empire of the tsars relied on Old Believer and Tatar merchant networks, Baltic German bureaucrats and scientists, and Jewish industrial barons.³⁶ Ottoman imperial diversity could even be seen in the composition of the “Young Turks” who sought to reform the empire and ended up calling for a more nationalist state. Among the founders of the organization that became the nucleus of the Committee of Union and Progress, there was not one ethnic Turk, but an Ottoman Albanian, two Kurds, and a Circassian.³⁷

While its neighbors splintered into nationally exclusive states, the Soviet Union found new ways of enduring as a multiethnic empire in twentieth-century Eurasia. Unlike the Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary, or even the Fourth French Republic, it effectively fashioned itself as a self-consciously anti-imperialist entity. It more emphatically expressed its multiethnic identity and more thoroughly pursued its internationalist vision, at least within state borders, than any empire had before it. If the Soviet Union can be said to have had a *mission civilisatrice*, it was not about turning Uzbeks into Russians, but rather about making both better communists. This mission was applied with equal zeal to Russian peasants and the pastoral nomads of Central Asia. Moreover, this mission was not simply led by Russians from Moscow; it was embraced by radical communists of diverse ethnic backgrounds. In the Soviet Union, internal diasporas were not simply compradors or imperial intermediaries; they were often the very builders of empire.

The Soviet empire of diasporas was ruled from Moscow, but it was not, contrary to what many historians have argued, merely constructed by the center. The Soviet Union was formed as a federative state following the absorption of Ukraine, Belarus, and the countries of the

South Caucasus, all of which experienced brief periods of independence after the collapse of the Russian Empire.³⁸ Although the Soviet Union became a highly centralized federation that accorded each republic the same types of national forms, the degree to which nations were granted cultural autonomy varied, based on demography and the perceived need to accommodate local elites. In republics with large Russian populations, like the Kazakh SSR, Russian and the local language were accorded equal status, while in republics with a numerically dominant titular nationality, like the Georgian SSR, the local language retained primacy.³⁹ In addition, the treatment of local elites initially depended on the way republics were incorporated into the Soviet Union. After the Red Army's invasion of Georgia, for example, Lenin stressed the need for a conciliatory approach.⁴⁰ Although Stalin ultimately pursued a ruthless policy of political centralization in his homeland, Georgian national expression in the Soviet period was promoted by Georgian institutions that were established in the imperial period, and had begun developing their cultural repertoire before the Soviet state came into existence.

While the circumstances of nationalities in the Soviet Union were in part made by the nationalities themselves, policies in Moscow created a framework for interactions and gave the Soviet state a crucial role in classifying, sorting, and managing its diaspora populations. As committed socialists, the Bolsheviks judged all nationalities based on their perceived level of development, as understood in Marxist terms. Following Stalin's formula, nations were defined as "historically evolved" communities based on language, territory, economic life, and "psychological make-up"; some, by virtue of high literacy rates, territorial consolidation, economic development, and ideologically sound intellectual production, were judged to be more evolved, and thus closer to socialism, than others.⁴¹ As will be seen, this approach imbued nationality with some of the same characteristics as class, with important consequences for the domestic internationalism that took root within Soviet borders. Yet the state's framework for managing diversity proved remarkably durable. Although there was sometimes an undercurrent of racial thinking that informed popularly held beliefs about supposedly uncivilized "peoples of the East" or hot-tempered southerners, such concepts tended to remain in the background.⁴² Instead, diasporas were more likely to be