

The Communist Nationalizing State: Origins and Long Term Consequences¹

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The creation of modern liberal democracy has entailed the incorporation of diverse populations with different identities. Over time, not only have new identities proliferated but successively they have fought to have their interests acknowledged, recognized, and occasionally satisfied within liberal democracy. This is one way of thinking about the evolution of liberal democracy's success -- as the capacity to incorporate previously excluded and newly created identities.

Despite such successes, it still is easier to build a democracy where the membership status of members is not questioned. Since Rousseau, democratic theorists have understood that the most formidable challenge to democracy is pluralism. A people that governs itself must still define itself as a people. Even in the West, the question of peoplehood continues to sit uneasily with racial and ethnic diversity. As Ryan Enos notes, “[I]t is considered one of our strengths and liberal individuals usually favor diversity as a matter of ideology and public policy. We often support diversity out of a genuine ideological commitment.” (Enos 2017, 46) Yet his research also shows that as crucial as support for diversity is for modern democracy, diversity can greatly complicate public policy and even turn majority groups against minority groups or those perceived as being outside the community of solidarity.

Contact with “outsiders” may promote respect and understanding, but the research on this question also indicates that the conditions under which the “contact hypothesis” works are quite restrictive and usually depend upon the interactions being positive and between “equals.” But these conditions rarely exist. As Enos notes about the United States, “not only does equality between groups not exist, but true interpersonal contact across groups seldom takes place, even when groups are proximate. Two groups can live in the same area without having meaningful interpersonal contact.” (Enos 2017, 76) Evidence suggests that even where people desire

¹ This paper is a draft chapter three of our book, *Violent Revolution and the Prospects for Democracy*. The scholarly apparatus still needs to be added

diversity at some abstract level, they do not necessarily like its perceived consequences. For that reason, he and others have concluded, ethnic diversity can make governing more difficult.

What is true for the developed West may be even more true for what eventually became the postcommunist world. In parts of the West, the question of peoplehood, of nationhood, was resolved before the advent of electoral competition. In much of the world, and in Eastern Europe in particular, it was not.² Just who belonged, who was a member of the community, remained an open and contested question.

In this paper we explore the communist legacy of addressing this question for the post-communist world. Our main contention is that, although unintended, the regimes of the communist world deployed revolutionary violence to achieve many of the modernizing, nation-building functions of non-communist states. They did so with a different theory but with almost identical tools: ethnic cleansing and cultural engineering. The results of their (frequently murderous) efforts were mixed but non-trivial, and if the nation-building projects of the West paved the way for eventual democratization in that part of the world, so too, ironically did the nation-building projects of the communist revolutionaries, ultimately help pave the way for democratization in 1989. Even where democratizers did not win or have faced setbacks, we maintain that the projects of cultural construction and homogenization may provide one building block of democracy in the future or make it difficult for the foes of democracy to re-impose authoritarian rule in the present. As in the West, the challenges to democracy posed by diversity do not disappear but the legacy of communist rule was to alter these challenges in irreversible ways by reshaping the ethnic map of the region. Communist states were ultimately nationalizing states, no less than the states they succeeded. To the extent that viable national communities and the question of membership in the community is a prerequisite for democracy, the violent nation-building efforts of the communist era may have had unintended salutary effects.

Revolutionary Rule and the Nation

The salient features of communist regimes were their violent and revolutionary character in the service of a particular telos, a transformed modernity. Just as revolutionary violence may serve the interests of state builders, even when they are more interested in “regime type” than “state” power, so too does it often serve the cause of nation-building. Revolutions in the modern world, as one of the ways that traditional society is transformed into modern society,³ occur not only in geographically bounded locations but are made in the name of the “the people. As the reference to Rousseau above indicates, modern rule only works if it is justified in the name of the people, whether that is construed procedurally or substantively through an ideological definition of the people and who speaks in their name. A form of government based on popular sovereignty must define who “the people” are. As noted in parts of the West, the question of peoplehood, of nationhood, was solved before the advent of the state, but in many cases, it was revolutionary

² To see how the contours of who was included in the Polish nation changed over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries see, Brian Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

³ Huntington 1968.

states that ultimately engaged in the exercise of nation-building. And they frequently engage in the exercise with great force.

Contemporary democratic theory has tended to view multiculturalism as either desirable or at least manageable. But mass democracy creates new sources of division: control of the state and the exercise of its power becomes dependent upon either winning elections or making a legitimate claim of acting in the name of the people. Modern revolutionary ideology may be uninterested in establishing a cultural definition of political membership. However, establishing a community of common culture is a prerequisite for virtually any sort of rule based on popular sovereignty. Almost intuitively revolutionaries understand this and it is certainly no accident that over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, French, Russian, and Chinese revolutionaries universalized a particular version of Muscovite, Isle de France, and Han Chinese culture throughout their realms. Revolutionary masses started out as classes but were forged into nations. Revolutionaries do this often out of expediency rather than principle, but there is no gainsaying that revolutionary states were no less “nationalizing” or covetous of their neighbors’ culturally related peoples than non-revolutionary states.

Given the absence of moral restraint, the instruments available to revolutionaries intent on cultural homogenization are significantly greater in scope (if not in kind). All states in the modern world are “gardening states.” In that they view their societies as “objects of design, cultivating, and weed-poisoning” but revolutionaries do an even better job in the imposition of standardized languages, the unification of symbols, the suppression of cultural particularisms, and, most crucially violent demographic engineering.

The product of much of this violence is the consolidation of national communities. Ironically, the creation of a unified national community, just as the creation of a modern state, is almost never the top priority of revolutionaries. The existence of the “French” or the “Russians” (let alone the Soviets), the “Yugoslavs,” and the “Chinese,” was more assumed than proven before 1789, 1917, and 1949. But if revolutionaries had not forged nations, in whose name would they have ruled? French revolutionaries understood this all too well, as Eugen Weber shows in his masterful study of the hegemonic rise of a single cultural identity in 19th century France. Russia revolutionaries rejected a conventional procedural notion of democratic rule but they did “organize” their realm into a number of more or less clearly identifiable cultural communities (“socialist in content but national in form” in the Leninist argot). Democracy does not require the creation of cultural homogeneity but the “costs” of rule are lower when more than one cultural group is not claiming ownership of the state or demanding to nurture and universalize its high culture among the panoply of vernaculars. Communists approached the problem both ruthlessly and pragmatically.

Revolutionaries do not need to create cultural homogeneity; there is nothing compelling them to do so and they can choose, for any number of reasons, to consolidate their power on the basis of multiple national communities. This indeed may be part of the Soviet story (even though this does ignore the significant and relentless Russification across the country for 70 years, particularly among elites). But democratic rule on the basis of multiple groups is not easy, and one legacy of revolutionary violence may indeed be the creation not only of states but also of

“nation-states” that had not been “imagined” and otherwise would not have been viable or even existed.

Of course neither state-building nor nation-building violence associated with revolutionary regimes gets us to the point of democracy, even if both are necessary conditions. Just how necessary they were is perhaps best illustrated by the obstacles that ethnic diversity posed to democracy before the communist era.

Diversity and Democracy in Pre-communist Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia

The politics of ethnicity dominated interwar politics in East-Central Europe. It is not that class considerations did not matter, but distributional politics were viewed through an ethnic lens and the two intersected in ways that complicated democratic governance. Despite the fact that the great powers at the Paris Peace Conference recognized this, they were ultimately incapable of preventing it. Whereas the intention of the conference was the goal of national determination of the peoples of the region, in practice a combination of political expediency, Allied desire to punish the defeated powers, and the intermixed geographic distribution of national groups precluded such a neat outcome. What emerged from the ruins of Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires was a set of countries in which there was, in most cases, a substantial mismatch between state and national boundaries. The peace treaties let millions of former Austrian Germans as citizens of Czechoslovakia and millions more Hungarians in Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia. If Germany and Hungary were “undersized” and desired more than anything the return of their populations languishing in what were now sovereign foreign countries, this opposite was true in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. These now oversized countries contained weighty minorities.

In Czechoslovakia, Germans constituted 22 percent of the population, outnumbering Slovaks, and significant Hungarian and Ruthenian minorities lived in concentrated areas outside of the Bohemian heartland. In Poland, Ukrainians comprised 15 percent of the population, concentrated in the East and Southeastern part of the country; Jews made up 10 percent of all inhabitants and were dispersed throughout hundreds of cities and small towns. Hungary in many respects was the exception in that its downsizing at Trianon, left it with an overwhelming Hungarian majority but its capital, Budapest remained heavily Jewish—23 percent in 1930—even though Jews made up only 5 percent of the overall population.

In addition to the inexperience of the new elites and the crippling disparities between the region’s rich and the poor, the problem ethnic diversity posed for democracy became quickly apparent. Even in the old, pre-democratic, imperial order managing relations between ethnic communities was never easy, normally required a great deal of tact, and occasionally the crown’s heavy hand. In a democracy, however, where controlling the state depends upon winning elections, the more or less efficient translation of demographic weight into political power potentially sets up a political threat to the ownership of the state by the titular national group. In both Poland and Czechoslovakia, the size of the parliamentary delegation of the ethnic minorities

frequently complicated coalition formation, and in the case of Poland actually determined the choice of the country’s first president (who was assassinated after having been supported by Jewish members of the Sejm) (Bernhard 2005, 113).

The ruling elites of these countries viewed their job as the creation of national states serving the titular nation. But they were significantly constrained. The treaties that had brought them into existence included the full panoply of liberal citizenship guarantees of the day. Most importantly there would be no ethnic restriction of the franchise. The treaties also provided for a range of minority cultural rights, including the substantial though not unlimited right to education in and public use of their native languages. This, together with the presence of neighboring national homelands and resistance to assimilation in to what were perceived as more “backward” cultures, preclude the more brutal forms of nation-building that were characteristic of Western Europe in earlier eras. The political party landscape of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, although different in important ways, each contained a significant divide, on the one hand, between parties that advocated pursuing the ethnic advantage through discriminatory taxation, exclusion from the civil service, boycotts of business, and even violence, and on the other, parties that favored a reasonable accommodation with ethnic minorities in order to preserve some semblance of liberalism and even democracy.

As a result, political forces achieved political success in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary by presenting minority populations as a threat to the cultural and political hegemony of the titular nation(s). The product of this success was that wherever they lived in non-trivial numbers, the locals shifted away from the politics of inclusion. Tables two and three demonstrate this with the average level of support for liberal democratic parties in several thousand communities in Poland and Czechoslovakia with different ethnic mixes. We consider the parliamentary elections in 1928 Poland and 1929 Czechoslovakia. In Poland the non-revolutionary parties of the left (primarily the Polish Socialist Party and the left-wing Agrarians) were the most committed to reasonable ethnic accommodation and a preservation of the liberal democratic order against the ethnic exclusionary and illiberal thrust of most other Polish parties. Table one shows that as the proportion of Jews living in the community decreases, the proportion of Poles supporting the non-revolutionary left increases. In Bohemia, Czechs are much more likely to support parties in favor of preserving the Republic where they are in a clear majority, with this number dropping off as the proportion of Germans in the community increases. In both cases, it is reasonable to conclude from these tables, the politics of ethnicity did not help democracy.

Table 1. Vote for Non-Revolutionary Left in 1928 Sejm Elections in communities with different concentration of Jews. (Mean vote in Central Poland), N=1034

Percentage of Jews	Greater than 75%	50%-74%	30%-50%	Less than 15%
Average Vote for Non-Revolutionary Left Across	30%	42%	49%	57%

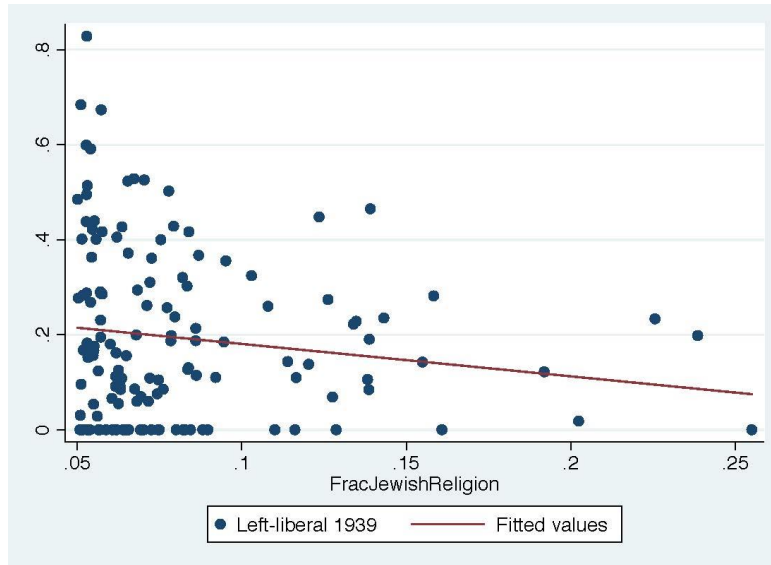
Communities in Range				

Table 2 Vote for Pro-Republican Parties in 1929 Czechoslovak Parliamentary Elections in communities with different concentrations of Germans, (Mean vote in Bohemia) N=8061

Percentage of Germans	Greater than 75%	50-74%	35-49%	Less than 10%
Bohemia	71%	76%	82%	90%

Hungary, of course, presents a different story. First, the drastic reduction of Hungary’s size left it far less diverse than Poland or Czechoslovakia. Jewish demographic weight could not reasonably have posed a political threat to Hungarian cultural dominance (in fact, Jews had been some of the most ardent Magyarizers in pre-World War I imperial Hungary). But such considerations did not deter the right from highlighting the “threat.” Second, the country from the outset jettisoned free and fair elections, so the mechanism of ethnic political threat could not be direct. Even so, party life continued, the party-aligned press remained obsessed and deeply divided on the “Jewish question,” and the anti-liberal right pressed for parliamentary majorities in various unfree and unfair elections. The only election that approach fairness (though still unfree because the communists could not compete) came in 1939. The scatter plot in figure one shows the relationship between the vote for liberal parties and Jewish demographic weight in communities with at least 5 percent Jews in the 1939 election. Although the relationship is weaker than in Poland and Czechoslovakia, and based on far fewer observations, even here as the percentage of Jews in a community increased, the support for liberal parties fell.

Figure one. Fraction in vote for Liberal parties in 1939 Hungarian election in communities with different percentages of Jews



Of course, this data primarily illustrates the impact of different quantities (rather than quality) of contact at the smallest unit of aggregation available (mostly between 500 and 2000 inhabitants), the municipality, but it does suggest, as the same observational (and some quasi-experimental) studies on the United States in the current era also show, that contact between ethnic groups does not always produce liberal democratic politics. It very much does depend upon the general atmosphere in which the contact occurs, whether it occurs under conditions of “equality” or not. (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006) In interwar Eastern Europe, where the very definition of state ownership was contested, each intercultural exchange was burdened by this fact and almost by definition implied inequality and challenges to that inequality. In Czechoslovakia, Germans and Hungarians had experienced a devastating reversal of ethnic fortune after World War I. In Poland, Germans experienced the same loss of state ownership and Ukrainians emerged as the real loser of the post-Versailles order, receiving no state of any size (apart from the ersatz sovereignty of the Soviet Ukrainian Republic across the border). All of these national minorities lobbied hard for minority rights and sometimes received assistance from the revisionists in Germany, Hungary, and the Soviet Union.

Jews, for their part, were increasingly and quickly mobilized into Zionism, an ideology at this point which did not necessarily a signal of an intention to move to Palestine. Rather it meant pushing hard for Jewish communal rights where Jews lived. Furthermore wherever Zionism found fertile ground, it sent a signal to the non-Jewish community that Jews would remain Jews and, in most cases, would resist joining any narrow (read Christian) version of the nation-building project virtually everywhere. Zionists represented the “new Jewish politics” of full chested assertiveness that cast aside the old politics of quiet intercession (*shtadlanut*) and invoked noisier and more aggressive means. The Zionists consistently fielded the electorally most potent parties in Jewish Poland (far outpacing the communists whom they were accused, falsely, of backing) and eventually emerged as forces at the organizational level in both Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

Ethnic diversity was conducive to a politics of ethnic political mobilization as a means of distributive conflict. This produced a toxic atmosphere for fledgling democracy. Very few non-minority parties managed to capture substantial numbers of minority voters. To some extent, Jews backed parties of the left and right in the hopes of political assimilation, but this remained a minority phenomenon (Kopstein and Wittenberg 2010). In Poland, the communist party—the most universalist of all movements—had to field separate parties for Poles, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Jews.

Ethnic diversity did not preclude or destroy democracy in interwar Eastern Europe, but it did make it more difficult by dividing already poor countries along one more axis of distributional conflict. In all three cases, response to ethnic diversity was ultimately a pursuit of ethnic advantage, at first within the confines of liberal democracy, but ultimately beyond the restraints of the liberal order. The Nazi invasion of the region both intensified and changed this dynamic. In all three countries, the “Jewish question” was addressed with deadly consequences, sometimes with more and sometimes with less local participation. But apart from the Jews (and even in the communist era, as we shall see, the Jewish question lingered), the Nazis legacy left the ethnic mixture mostly intact, an issue that the communists and communist dominated governments would address after 1945. In many respects, the communist agenda of nation-building built upon the work already carried out by the the nationalizing liberal states of the interwar era and even the racial agendas of the reactionary and local fascist regimes of the late 1930s and 1940s even if their means of operation and ideology were different.

Communism and Violent Nation-Building

If communist elites did not anticipate the complexities of state-building, they were even more overwhelmed by the force of nationalism. Communist states espoused a spirit of a Marxist universalism in which solidarities would be based on class rather than on ethnic or racial particularity, but the reality they faced was far different. In one of history’s crueler ironies this universalist ideology appeared at precisely the same moment when nationalism, perhaps the most powerful and enduring particularist ideology in history, reached its apogee. Even more so than the working classes, it was nations who cried out for freedom and self-determination. In the competition between class and nation, the latter consistently trumped the former.⁴ This was true not only at the elite level but at the mass level as well.

Leninist parties had little choice but to come to terms with the popular victory of nation over class. Out of power, they played the nationality card, garnering the support of some of the losers of ethnic politics with loud calls for self-determination.⁵ Once in power, their response was twofold: one part partially accommodationist and the other, brutally violent. Leninist theory summarized the accommodationist aspect under the rubric “national in form and socialist in content,” which was really a way of recasting imperial Russia into manageable units in which Moscow promoted or even created cultures anew but brutally crushed any and all attempts at genuine political independence. The Soviet imperial design made sense since the revolutionary

⁴ Szporluk, 1986.

⁵ Burks 1961.

objective was global in a world where national belonging would only slowly, if ever, diminish. Basic unity, however, required standardization. Russians and Russian culture occupied this position in what became quasi-colonial operations stretching from Siberia, through Central Asia and the Caucasus, the East Slavic peripheries, and ultimately into the Baltic states where Russian settlers fundamentally altered the ethnic demography following the annexations immediately after World War II.

Some of this project could be undertaken with mild administrative measures, but much of it faced stiff resistance and required a great deal of force to implement. Amir Weiner invokes Zygmunt Bauman's conception of the ethnic gardening state in order to describe the Soviet nationality regime.⁶ Rather than eliminate all nations, Stalin chose to make the entire project governable through labeling, cultivating, identifying, and, when needed, weeding out specific dangers. Nowhere was this approach more evident than in the "marches" of East-Central Europe, which only fell under Soviet control in 1944-45. There, the politics of ethnicity, irredentism, and territorial grievance dominated interwar politics and wartime collaboration and resistance. The Soviet response as they moved into the region was to "resolve" the problem of ethnicity and borders once and for all in a way that rivaled the demographic engineering of the Nazis, if not in body count, then certainly in ambition. German minorities were expelled from every country in the region. The entire country of Poland was moved a couple of hundred kilometers westward and both Ukrainians and Poles (and others) were forcibly moved to the "correct" side of the new borders to their titular "countries" (the process had begun in 1943 during the mutual blood letting between the two groups). As for the region's Jews, Germany's extermination effort had eliminated Jewish commercial and cultural weight from urban areas and communists expressed little interest restoring Jewish presence. Lvov, once heavily Polish and Jewish, now became a Ukrainian city, German Breslau became Polish Wroclaw, and Polish and Jewish Wilno was now Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. We discuss some of these processes in more detail below. Jewish populations returning to Eastern Europe, many of whom survived the war by fleeing eastward to the Soviet Union, overwhelmingly emigrated, either to Palestine or the West.⁷

Communists may have meant to treat the national question in a new way but in East-Central Europe seen through the lens of the long duree, the brutality of the Leninist gardening state produced rather familiar, "nationalizing," results. They are illustrated in table one below:

⁶ Bauman 1989, Weiner 1999.

⁷ Jockusch, Laura & Lewinsky, Tamar. (2010). Paradise Lost?: Postwar Memory of Polish Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union. *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*. 24. 373-399. Marke Edele, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and Atina Grossman. 2017. *Shelter From The Holocaust, Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union*. Detroit, Wayne State University Press. Françoise S. Ouzan and Manfred Gerstenfeld, eds. *Postwar Jewish Displacement and Rebirth 1945-1967*. Brill, 2014.

Table one: Size of Titular Majorities before and after Communism in Selected Countries⁸

	Titular Majority (%-age)	
	Pre-Communist	Post-Communist
East-Central Europe		
Poland	65	97
Romania	71	89
Czechoslovakia	65	Czech R. 94 Slovakia 86
Bulgaria	87	85
Hungary	81	98
Former Soviet Union		
Latvia	75	61
Estonia	88	69
Lithuania	89	84
Ukraine	76 (1939)	77
Kazakhstan	58 (1926)	63 (2009)

Several features of this table are noteworthy. First and perhaps most momentous, in East-Central the Leninist parties completed the process of demographic engineering begun by the Germans during the war, but altered the composition of the results. Through the adjustment of borders, forced population transfers, and a renewed “nationalization” efforts, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Romania were transformed from multinational states to into nation-states. The ethnic politics and intractable irredentism that made these societies in the interwar period almost ungovernable had been changed for good (so much so that in the post-communist period Jewish life could be reintroduced in Poland with a touch of astonishing nostalgia). The politics of coercive nationalizing modernism had been completed not by the nationalists but by Leninist parties. In this way, they unknowingly made the transition to democracy easier in the region than it otherwise might have been. In the Soviet Republics, we either see relative stability or even a decrease in the titular nationality. We explore the causes of this in the next section.

The Soviet Union and China: Creating and Managing Nations

Upon seizing power, virtually everywhere communists proceeded along two axes. Where masses had yet to be mobilized into nationalized politics, Leninist parties violently organized them into “legible” national units. They did so on strategic grounds but also out of high modernist, developmental principles. This approach was implemented in both the Soviet Union and China, and involved not only the violent suppression of nations that did not fit into the devised and simplified grid but also the propagation of new identities that could be more readily managed. At the same time, communist rulers went about standardizing languages and

⁸ CIA Factbook, Wikipedia, Rothschild 1974, Nationmaster

promoting national-unity around languages of “friendship” and even the universalization of local vernaculars.

As Richard Pipes noted in his classic work on the creation of the Soviet Union, the initial impetus for nationalities policy quickly became strategic and military (Pipes 1954). Bolshevik leaders sought and in many cases found local allies against separatist rebellions on the periphery of the formerly Czarist empire (Khalid 2001). But the Bolshevik project not only continued the Russian imperial design, but quickly moved beyond it and sought to render the hundreds of identity groups legible and manageable for rulers in Moscow. This was an “affirmative action empire” (Martin 2001) in that it empowered and supported non-Russia elites, institutions, and languages, but it was also a modernist colonial operation meant to simplify and “civilize” the various and potentially conflicting identity projects.

Francine Hirsch (2005) maintains Soviet strategy was one of “‘double assimilation.’ The assimilation of a diverse population into the nationality categories and, simultaneously, the assimilation of those nationally categorized groups into the Soviet state and society. Census taking and border making were couched in the language of self-determination but were in fact powerful ‘disciplining’ mechanisms that facilitated administrative consolidation and control. The categorization of the entire population according to ‘nationality’—including clans and tribes that lacked national consciousness—helped the regime to pursue its agenda of state-sponsored evolutionism.” Although the idiom in Hirsch’s analysis may be one of the Foucaultian “violence,” in the sense of a disciplining discourse, behind this discourse resided a genuine coercive apparatus willing to cast aside any restraint to combat those who opposed its definitions and goals.

China replicated the Soviet nationality experience, but with some important variations. Upon coming to power in 1949, the regime set about counting its people in a census, with the intention of letting the results guide the regime in allotting seats to minority groups in the new national assembly. Here, too, however, the results yielded alarming evidence on the formerly imperial peripheries. Open-ended (“fill in the blank”) questions on ethnic belonging showed hundreds of competing and illegible identity projects. In Yunnan province, the population divided itself into over 400 ethnic groups (*minzu*, in Chinese) ranging in size from the thousands to single digits in sometimes neighboring villages. The regime’s response was to place a simplifying grid on the complex Chinese ethnic reality, a grid inspired and derived from Western modernist anthropology of the pre-communist period, to reduce the number of nationalities from 400 to fifty-six based on estimations of how easily the groups could become more or less unified ethnicities. Notwithstanding the Leninist idiom in which the project was cast, the purpose of the regime’s “ethnic classification project,” as Mullaney study shows, was to “reestablish territorial integrity and legitimate a state in which a predominantly Han Chinese regime would govern a highly diverse polity encompassing peoples of strikingly diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and social backgrounds” (Mullaney 2011, 22). Although party officials and social scientists appear as the primary agents in this project, behind them lay a central state power ready to enforce these official definitions.

In China, the grand strategy of national simplification extended to the “Chinese” language itself. The vast majority of the population of China was classified as ethnically Han, but the population of country’s various regions spoke mutually incomprehensible languages (rather than “dialects” as Beijing would have it). Previous imperial and Republican rulers had tried to address the issue and standardize the language in both its spoken and written forms. China’s communists, although mostly failing in the second task for eliminating ideograms in favor of an alphabet—something Mao favored—ultimately did impose a universalized form of the language spoken in Beijing (referred to as Putonghua or what we call Mandarin) as the *Hochdeutsch* of the country. This project had eluded every previous order in China’s history, but according to Moser, hundreds of millions Chinese citizens over the past generations learned to speak the language. “Anyone who has spent time in China’s dialect areas can attest to the fact that the local citizens may not be able to express themselves fluently in Putonghua, but they can almost always understand it to a high degree...The fact is, whatever we call it, there truly has developed something like a common language for most of the Chinese speaking world.” (Moser 2016, 88) Perhaps the greatest act of nation-building on China’s history was achieved by the country’s nominally internationalist rulers.⁹

In both the Soviet Union and China, state power and national simplification went hand in hand. Without the extension of state power, highlighted in the previous chapter, none of the nation-building projects stood a chance of success. The wherewithal to master and simplify their environment was matched by the communists’s boundless confidence that the ends justified the brutal means. Nowhere did this deadly combination of ends and mean become more obvious than in those locations where communists came to power in countries with ethnically heterogenous populations already mobilized into competing nation-building projects.

Ethnic Cleansing: Aligning State and Nation.

Where nationalized masses had already been mobilized into politics, as in much of Eastern Europe, communist rulers violently ensured that nation and state aligned as much as possible. During the 1930s in the Soviet Union, this involved the deportation of unwanted populations in border regions such as Finns, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, Germans, Kurds Chinese and Koreans from border regions, and then during the Great Terror the arrest and execution of these nationalities, along with Greeks and Bulgarians (Suny and Martin 2001). In the months following the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, starting in fall 1939, the deportations eastward (and murder just before the outset of the war on the Eastern front) of Poles, Ukrainians, and Jews was driven by political concerns, to deprive these ethnic groups in the newly “Sovietized” western Belarus and Ukraine of the political leadership.

⁹ Emerson already wrote of this in his *From Empire to Nation*, putting it diplomatically “Less bound to ancient tradition than their predecessors, the Communists have attacked the problem with vigor, including exploration of a possible shift to phonetic alphabet, in order to secure greater efficiency and economy and to read the masses better for purposes of indoctrination.” As noted, the chosen solution was not alphabetization but pushing the universalization of the Beijing vernacular (along with some simplification of ideographs) (Emerson 1960, 137).

During the war, the deportations continued, mostly with a military logic and frequently with tremendous force exerted to ensure rapid compliance. Ivan Serov, the NKVD officer charged with the deportation in August 1941 of the Volga Germans who had lived in the region since the time of Catherine the Great to Siberia and Kazakhstan describes the operation as driven by the exigencies of war: “In the middle of August M. I. Kalinin urgently called me and said: ‘Ivan Alexandrovich, go to Saratov, where there is an autonomous republic of Volga Germans with the capital city Engels. As you will see, the thing is at the front things aren’t going well and god forbid if the Germans make it to that region, our Germans will give us a very hard time. Therefore, today in the Politburo it was decided to resettle them in Siberian and Kazakhstani oblasts.” (Serov 2017, 183). Serov notes: “On the day of the operation our officers and soldiers announced to the Germans how much they are allowed to bring with apart from personal effects, and in the course of two days we sent off 470,000 Volga Germans” (184).

Serov describes similar operations among the Kalmyks in September 1943, in Chechnya-Ingushetia in January 1944, and then, in greater detail, the deportation of almost 200,000 Crimean Tatars over a three-day period in May 1944. Again, stresses the military rationale for the deportation and returns repeatedly to reports of the local population of the “monstrous actions” of the Germans and “the Crimean Tatars who served them” during the occupation. Faced with the prospect of an extended guerilla war, Serov was once again assigned the grisly task of deporting an entire ethnic group (Serov 2017, 193).¹⁰

After World War II, the new communist rulers either initiated or confirmed the violent realigning of states and nations in the newly Sovietized Eastern Europe. It is important to acknowledge their motivations for doing so were less ideological than instrumental and they did not always proceed consistently. Germans were removed from Hungary but remained in place in Romania. Ukrainians and Poles caught on the wrong side of new international frontiers had to leave their homelands, but the Hungarians in Czechoslovakia and Romania mostly remained in place. Having decided to move their own international borders eastward into interwar Poland, they shifted the Polish border westward. Having left Hungary with its Trianon borders, it had to decide whether to move millions of Hungarians into a shrunken national state. Stalin faced conflicting imperatives. Without the “Potsdam transfers,” as Ther notes, “Poland would have become a binational state, with the twenty-five million Poles who had survived the war living door-to-door with eight million Germans.” (Ther 2014,147). Stalin was determined to solve minority problems within his sphere of influence, but did not hesitate to exploit fears of

¹⁰ Notwithstanding the strong evidence of a military logic to these deportations, the personnel charged with executing them undoubtedly possessed many of the typical prejudices of the day. Serov himself certainly did. In May 1940, well after the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact had gone into force and Poland had been divided between the Germany and the Soviet Union, Serov was present during the agreed upon exchanges of Poles who wished to leave what was now Western Ukraine for German occupied Poland: “I decided to observe how German SS officers sort the Poles. Dressed in civilian attire and presenting myself as chairman of a local soviet, I followed an SS officer who observed those who signed up from head to toe, and, seeing a Jew, said ‘Juden’, and pointed with his finger ‘out of line.’ Upon completion of the procedure I asked the SS officer how he could spot a Jew. He explained to me the basic features of this nationality, and from then on I could always, without failure, spot a Jew.” (Serov 2017, 60).

revanchism to increase the political and diplomatic dependence of the newly German-free Poland and Czechoslovakia (Ther 2001, 53).

Despite the differences in ideology, the longer term and familiar trend of using the state to promote demographic sorting along ethnic lines not only continued under communism but, in the absence of domestic and international liberal norms, even intensified. At a minimum, from the standpoint of “nationalizing” as a state goal, what we see is much more a politics of continuity after 1945 than one of change.

The most clear-cut case involves the Germans throughout the region. Toward the war’s end, many Germans, knowing how much they were hated, left on their own accord, especially those who had been colonists under the Nazis. But the expulsion movement quickly spread to the very old German communities in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary. Czechoslovak President Edvard Benes, as early as 1938 from exile in England, had called for the expulsion of the Germans from his country and suggested the Hungarians do the same with their Germans (presumably to make room for Hungarians who would be expelled from Slovakia). Although the Potsdam conference called for “orderly and humane” transfer of Germans, historians use the term “wild expulsions” to characterize the fury behind the spontaneous evictions. In a radio address from Brno in May 1945 Benes noted German behavior during the war and went on to say that the Germans “must pay for all this with a great and severe punishment... We must liquidate the German problem definitively.” Local populations took matters into their own hands, occasionally marking local Germans with the letter “N” (for Nemec—German) or other distinguishing word on their clothing (Ther 2001, 55).

Over time, the expulsions became more orderly with the “Benes decrees,” which not only organized the “transfer” (“odsun” in the Czech bureaucratese) to their titular homelands, but also seized their property and resettled Czechs and Slovaks on German and Hungarian lands. The expulsions were not only tolerated by the Western allies, quite explicitly in fact by Churchill and Roosevelt, but also by Stalin who instructed the Czechoslovak leaders to “throw them out. Now they will learn themselves what it means to rule over someone else.”

Although these policies were initiated by non-Communists, leading Czechoslovak communists, including Klement Gottwald, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, enthusiastically supported them. He referenced not only the war that had just ended but also previous humiliations extending back to the Battle of White Mountain in 1620 when the Holy Roman Empire had brutally put down a proto-national revolt. Both Germans and Hungarians in the country were allotted the roles of the “feudal lords” and an “alien nobility.” The mass property seizures enjoyed widespread popularity as fulfilling national ambitions that previous democratic and authoritarian governments dreamed of but were unwilling to undertake. Seen through the lens of communist ideology, the expulsions and the mass transfer of “ruling class” property could be recast as revolutionary action. But reconsidered through the longer course of political development in the region, the evictions amounted much more to a straightforward ethnic sorting.

The continuities with the goal of previous regimes become even clearer when we move to the expulsions of the Germans from Western Poland. During the interwar period, the Poland's West had been dominated politically by the anti-communist and anti-German National Democratic movement (the Endecja). During the German occupation the Nazis had expelled more than one million Poles from western Poland. After 1945 a post-war anti-communist nationalist insurgency did challenge communist power, but the movement was short-lived and ultimately futile. In fact, according to Carp's (2006) study of Poznan, "The fiercely anti-Communist but highly nationalistic society of Poznan, the church, and the Endecja together pioneered collaboration with Poland's Communist rulers—to ethnically cleanse the country." (Carp 2006, 8)

The cleansing was initiated by the secret police but ultimately celebrated by the nationalists. The Polish Western Union, an organization with Endecja roots and personnel, worked closely with the new regime and advocated polonizing the "recovered territories." Although the cooperation between the communists and the nationalizing Endecja successor organizations ceased once the country took a clearly Stalinist turn, it reemerged after 1956 with Gomulka's return to power. Gomulka's Poland, therefore, to a large extent was a product of Roman Dmowski's integral nationalist ideology. The nationalists ultimately turned their sights on the regime itself, but this would not come until years later. Meanwhile the continuities with, and intensification of, the policies of the interwar era regarding the Germans are unmistakable.

The cleansing of East Europe's German populations extended beyond Czechoslovakia to Hungary, Yugoslavia, and, somewhat later and under different circumstances Romania. By the end of 1940s, over 7.5 million residents who in one way or another were classified as "Germans"—some recent settlers but many from very old communities—had been resettled, a brutal and remarkable feat of ethnic engineering undertaken by nominally "internationalist" dominated governments.

The scale of population transfers in the East after the war may have been smaller--Poles moved to the West, Ukrainians to the East—but no less violent. In all cases the goal was aligning nations with states. Ethnic Poles decamped from Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania, perhaps over 1.5 million. The Polish university in Lwów, its professors and library, moved to the university in the "recovered" city of Wrocław (Breslau). Although the tragedy of abandoning such ancient "Polish" cities as Lwów weighed heavily on the national imagination, it was mostly done in a peaceful and orderly fashion.

The same cannot be said of the deportation of Ukrainians eastward. Virtually everyone understood that no matter how humiliating it may have been to live under Polish rule in the interwar period, conditions were far worse in Soviet Ukraine. Ukrainians resisted and sometimes attempted to re-cross the Polish border, an extraordinarily dangerous act.

Ultimately the Polish communist authorities pursued a mixed strategy, deporting fewer over time to the Soviet Union. Part of this change reflected strategic considerations on the ground, a stubborn Ukrainian insurgency after the war and the Polish government's desire to drain away its civilian support. During Operation Vistula, Polish military units herded over 140,000 Ukrainians

onto trains deported them to northern and western Poland, eventually dispersing them all over the country, where they lost their specific political weight and could be assimilated to Polish national culture. Even if devised on military ground, the strategy of Operation Vistula evinced remarkable continuities with interwar nationalist thought. Whereas the Endecja considered the Germans by definition hostile to the Polish nation, the country's Slavic minorities were considered to be suitable material for assimilation. One or two generations without national schooling, churches, a party press in their native tongue, and, most importantly demographic dispersion, would transform Ukrainians into Poles. This is exactly what communist Poland achieved, something the interwar regime could not.

Perhaps most painfully ironic, however, are the continuities regarding the Jews. Of course the Nazi extermination effort left relatively few Jewish survivors (most of whom had returned from the Soviet Union where, ironically, the injustices of deportation saved them from near certain death at the hands of the Germans), the majority of whom eventually left the area. Rather than ethnic engineering, the core challenge for the post-war communist governments was what to do about private property, businesses, and other assets. The Jews who did return after the war frequently found hostile receptions, as locals throughout the region now inhabited their homes, sat on their furniture, and ate with their cutlery. Scholars have long maintained—a claim highlighted by Jan Gross's work on postwar Poland—that the anti-Jewish violence after the war in Poland reflected a generalized concern of property restitution claims. Earlier research had already written about this. Lucjan Dobroszycki in his study of anti-Jewish violence in 115 localities in the years 1945-1947 notes: "Jews were killed when they came to ask for return of their houses, workshops, farms and other property. They were assaulted when they tried to open stores or workshops. Bombs were planted in orphanages and other Jews public buildings. Jews were shot by unknown snipers and in full view of witnesses. Jews were attacked in their homes and forcibly removed from busses and trains. Jews were terrorized and forced to leave when they began to settle again in a small town or a village." (Dobroszycki 1973, 66). Of course, other sources of hostility to Jews beyond avarice had long been present throughout the region, but there is no gainsaying that the onetime transfer of property from Jews to locals, especially in Poland and Hungary, helped to create and new, indigenous middle class, even if this class would be absorbed into the communist social structure.

Communist governments responded to this issue with a mixture of diffidence and legal pettifoggery. Anti-Jewish violence was not promoted but it was frequently downplayed or ignored. In Hungary, for example, Jews were told to "work it out" with the new occupants of their property. In Poland, the state expropriated a great deal of property illegally confiscated from Jews by Nazis, the same is more or less the case in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. These expropriations, which occurred immediately after the war were legalized by subsequent communist governments. Large enterprises that had been confiscated and aryanized by the Germans, were confiscated and nationalized after the war as "German" property.

Communist anti-Semitism did not approach the Nazi variety in ends or means, but their stance on Jewish property and restitution bears striking continuities with the goals of the interwar

governments.¹¹ Scholars have long noted the generalized policy of transferring wealth from Jews to non-Jews during the 1930s in both Poland and Hungary (Kopstein and Wittenberg 2010, Janos 1982) in the hope of creating a “native” middle class. This lay at the core of both the Endecja’s aspirations and the various policies of Prime Minister’s of Horthy’s 1930s Hungary (Ungvary 2017). What neither of these regimes could achieve, the Communists did by accepting the results of the Nazi genocide and rendering any discussion of the “aryanizations” during the early 1940s and nationalizations of 1945-1948 beyond redress. In fact, the measures enjoyed widespread support across the political spectrum

But regarding the Jews, the reconciliation with the dominant pre-war nationalist narrative sometimes went beyond the socio-economic engineering of property confiscation, to the very presence of Jews. In Poland, this came to a head in 1968 when the vast majority of Poland’s remnant Jewish community as a sop the national sentiments at that time dominant in the communist party. In Hungary, where the remaining Jewish community was too large, a long term cleavage within the polity reemerged between the “city” (Jewish Budapest) and the small town countryside. And within the Soviet Union, Jewish was restricted to Yiddish, the teaching of Hebrew declared a crime, Zionism classified as an enemy ideology, and Jewish national political aspirations confined to a frigid and unattractive modern-day Pale of Jettlement in Siberia.

In short, across the board, Communist rulers in Eastern Europe did their best to align nation and state, and they succeeded to a remarkable degree. Huge and long-standing communities of Germans, Poles, and Ukrainians were permanently moved, as were numerous other smaller groups stranded in the states of other nations. By 1948, the region consisted mostly of homogenous nation-states. In some cases, such as Romania the rulers lacked the capacity and the backing of the Soviets to expel large non-titular nationalities. In other cases, such as Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union, where national groups could be concentrated, ersatz federalism was the preferred solution. But even in the federal cases, rulers were careful to tend the ethnic garden and carefully watched demographic balances for signs of dis-equilibrium or unrest (Martin 2001).

Conclusion

The communist version of the nationalizing state was not equally successful everywhere. Most notably in the Soviet Union itself, russification partially attenuated, partially altered, and partially reversed the nationalizing tendencies of the interwar period. In Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania, the immigration of Russians after the war decreased the size of the titular majority. In Ukraine, the effect of unifying the West Ukraine with the central and eastern regions following the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact served as much to russify and dilute Ukrainian identity in the West

¹¹ Götz Aly’s treatment of Nazi motivations, however, which stresses wealth transfer, is entirely consistent with both pre-and post-war strategies regarding the Jews, even if the means were far more extreme (Aly, 2008).

as it did to Ukrainianize the east. Not only at the level of language (which, with very few exceptions has not been a significant source of tension in Ukraine) but most clearly on questions of memory politics and differing views of the Nazi and communist past, Ukraine remains deeply divided. The communist era may have fostered a Ukrainian identity but it did not settle it and in some ways may have even muddled it. Such ambiguous results did not in themselves preclude the possibility of democracy taking root but the absence of a clear national community made matters more difficult and also made easier a new kind of politics of authoritarian diffusion from the East.

The process of nationalization picked up once again after the collapse of the Soviet Union in both the Baltic and East Slavic regions, but with a resurgent Russia under Putin, this became a source of significant tension. Stranded Russians or Russian speakers provided good raw material for political separatism. And in Ukraine the incomplete and intermittently ambitious nationalizing state has helped drive a civil war stoked from Moscow. The same may be in store for Kazakhstan and other locations in Central Asia if leaders there decide to embark on a significant ethnic gardening campaign of their own.

The general thrust of our argument in this chapter has been to show the continuities in nation-building between the pre-communist and communist eras. The main differences lie not primarily in the ends but in the means, and the result was remarkably “successful.” Communists may not have wanted to be nation-builders but their overall goal left them little choice but to take on that role. In doing so, the repertoire available to achieving this task did not differ greatly from that of the pre-communist elites. The Leninist dogma of “national in form, socialist in content” ultimately became “national in content” a formula with little appeal in a Soviet dominated imperial design but one that unwillingly solved a long-standing problem for every state in the region. Creating and stabilizing national cultures where none existed, fostering a modicum of national unity around a dominant high culture that overwhelmed vernaculars, and above all, careful attention to ethnic weeding to create demographic homogeneity where possible—these were the tools of communist elites. By 1989, would be democratizers in most places would no longer have to address the politics of diversity with the same urgency that confronted elites of the interwar era. The politics of diversity of ethnic and religious pluralism would return to the region and ultimately pose a huge challenge, but this time the problem was the product of processes occurring outside of the continent rather than a reflection of long-term competing nation-building projects from within.

