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### 3 ‘The wrong nationality’

#### Ascribed identity in the 1930s Soviet Union<sup>1</sup>

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Official Soviet documents, such as circulars, decrees, and instructions, of the kind held in archives are customarily endorsed with stamps emphasising the confidentiality of the material. ‘Not for Publication’; ‘Do Not Circulate’; ‘Return after Reading’; ‘Strictly Confidential’; ‘Secret’; ‘Top Secret’ etc. This lays bare a feature of the Soviet (and indeed post-Soviet) legal system that is familiar to anyone who has made a study of the subject: its binary character. The public face of the law (as presented in the legal acts published in the Soviet press) was countered by a web of regulations that was created by officials for their own purposes, and carefully concealed from view. Obviously, it was this second level, what one might call ‘Legality-2’ (*pravo-2*), that was of primary importance in guiding officials’ actual behaviour and their interpretation of statute. While some of this *sub rosa* material consisted of inter-office memoranda of little or no public interest, much of it was of fundamental relevance to rank-and-file citizens’ everyday lives, setting out ‘rights and duties’ (*prava i obyazannosti*),<sup>2</sup> in the standard Soviet formulation, of which they were expected to be aware, and rules that they might be penalised for violating. The material relating to the definition of *natsionalnost*, nationality, that I am discussing here was of this order.

In the Soviet Union, nationality (by which was meant not citizenship of the nation-state, named as *grazhdanstvo*, but a person’s ethnic identity), was a category of primary importance in social regulation, invoked in censuses, the residence permit (*propiska*), and the *passport* (internal passport, identity card). It is usually argued that this classification by nationality was actually invented in the Soviet period, but that is a misrepresentation of the facts. During the last two decades before 1917, the rubric *natsionalnost* was more and more commonly included in different types of documents relating to personal identity, including service records [*sluzhebnye attestaty*], medical cards, and military and police records (Ukazatel vidov 1998–99). The gradual shift from a state whose primary bases of legitimation and classification were social estate (*soslovie*) and religious affiliation to a state where nationality was the primary factor had many different causes, but among them was certainly the breakdown of the traditional estate relationships after 1861,<sup>3</sup> which in due course resulted in the equation of the passport

rights of the higher and lower orders of Russian society (the Ukaz of 5 October 1906 on the introduction of a unified system of 'passport books' for all subjects of the Russian Empire) and the declaration of equal rights for all the religious confessions of the Russian Empire (the Ukaz on Religious Toleration of 17 April 1905). Against this background, nationality started to seem a more reliable and stable identifying factor than estate or religious affiliation.<sup>4</sup> That said, for the time being the indication of ethnic affiliation did not replace the indications of confessional or estate affiliation, but supplemented these. The novelty of the Soviet passport, on the other hand, lay in the fact that the indication of nationality replaced the indication of religious affiliation, and in due course, of estate affiliation as well.

This project was the more difficult to realise in that a significant proportion of the population had rather vague understandings of their ethnic affiliation, and there was also no canonical inventory of the 'nationalities' resident in the USSR (in the post-Soviet period also, the inventories are 'corrected' every time a census takes place). Before 1918, the basis upon which nationality was determined was usually the person's religious affiliation. This official practice meant that, for instance, all Germans were automatically deemed to be Lutheran, but on the other hand, a German who had converted to Orthodoxy was assumed to be of Russian nationality.<sup>5</sup> By extension, Udmurts, Mordvins and others who had converted to Christianity were counted as Russians, while those who had not continued to be counted as Udmurts, Mordvins, etc. In the Western provinces of the Russian Empire, on the other hand, language played more of a role in determining nationality than religion. Some so-called 'small peoples' were not included in the official inventories of 'nationalities' and to all intents and purposes lost the right to existence.<sup>6</sup>

In the first decade of Soviet rule, the definition of *natsionalnost* by language and religious confession that had been employed in the first General Census of the Russian Empire in 1897 underwent a significant process of adaptation.<sup>7</sup> One of the central forces in this process was the Commission on the Study of the Tribal Composition of the Population of Russia (KIPS), which had, in fact, been set up under the Provisional Government in 1917. The members of KIPS put together the List of Nationalities of the USSR that was used to determine ethnic identity. After a great deal of argument, a two-step process of doing this was evolved. First, the respondent was to be asked a series of questions relating to his or her native language, religion, and the population group that he or she considered himself to belong to; then, as a second phase in processing this information, the information on nationality obtained from the respondent was to be compared with the list of nationalities that had been put together by the Commission.<sup>8</sup> The result was that it was fairly common for the respondent to refer to a nationality that was 'incorrect' (i.e., which, so far as the official list was concerned, did not exist). In addition, Soviet ethnographers also had their own, and different, views about which Soviet nationalities were the 'correct' ones. 'I. I. Zarubin,

the well-known specialist on Central Asia, recommended that if native speakers of the Uzbek language answered "Sart" when asked what nationality they belonged to, then they should be recorded as "Uzbek".<sup>9</sup> But whatever the process of 'editing' responses, at some level, the ethnic affiliation of a respondent was always based on his own words.<sup>10</sup>

Immediately after the Revolution, the categorisation of Russian citizens into estates was abolished, and from 1918, it was forbidden to specify a person's religion in any identity document.<sup>11</sup> Instead, new social categories were introduced: 'worker', 'collective farmer', 'individual peasant farmer', 'white-collar worker', 'student', 'writer', 'artist', 'artiste', 'sculptor', 'craftsman', 'pensioner', 'beneficiary',<sup>12</sup> 'no fixed occupation'. In reality, it was less 'social position' than occupation that was recorded by these classifications. The list of possible professions and jobs was decidedly peculiar, but it was generally understood that the denominations were temporary (after all, full social equality was supposed to be just round the corner).

At the same time, the new authorities needed reliable and definite categories into which they could group the population for the purposes of more effective control. It would appear that 'nationality' appealed because it was not 'contaminated' by pre-revolutionary associations, and at the same time depended on characteristics that were perceived as relatively stable and to all intents and purposes obvious. When the passport – abolished in 1917 as an instrument of exploitation visited by the Tsarist regime on the population – was reintroduced in 1932, nationality was one of the categorisations specified. The question about nationality in the first Soviet census of 1926, with the process of determination of a respondent's nationality by harmonisation with the official list of recognised nationalities, worked as a kind of dress rehearsal for this. Nevertheless, large numbers of people were confused about what was expected from them, and about what nationality was being ascribed.

The 'Decree on the Soviet Passport' of December 1932 stipulated that the rubric 'nationality' should be completed according to the information given by the person to whom the passport was being issued. In other words, everyone receiving a passport was entitled to specify the nationality to which they themselves believed they belonged. This triumph of Soviet constructivism was to last, outwardly at least, for 21 years. Only in the Decree on the Passport System of the USSR of 1953 were the regulations for determining nationality changed. 'Nationality in the passport is recorded on the basis of the nationality of the holder's parents. If the parents belong to different nationalities, then when the passport is issued, the nationality recorded may be that of the father or the mother of the holder, depending on what he or she may prefer. From that point, the holder may not change his or her nationality.' In effect, before the 1953 Decree was passed (i.e. between 1932 and 1953), the holder was, according to the letter of published law, officially entitled to determine his or her own nationality.

## Stories from the Archives

How did this process of negotiation of nationality actually work in reality? One source that helps answer this question is the materials held in the fond of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR at the State Archive of the Russian Federation, which include petitions addressed to the Supreme Soviet's Council of Nationalities. Among these are some 20 petitions dating from 1937–39, which will form the basis of my discussion here.<sup>13</sup> The authors of these petitions state that they have been assigned an 'incorrect' nationality in their passport and request the Supreme Soviet to correct the mistake, or to determine what their 'correct' nationality would actually be.

In the first example, the author complains about the inaccurate transcription of his father's nationality:<sup>14</sup>

From cit[izen]. Shubert Yuri Iosifovich resident Belorussian SSR town of Zhlobin typography of the newspaper *Shlyakh sotsializma*].<sup>15</sup>

Declaration<sup>16</sup>

I hereby request you to peruse my letter and help me. On 20 June 1939 I went to Zhlobin passport office to renew my passport. On 21 June I received a new one. The Assistant Supervisor of the passport office a woman (I don't know her name) put the following note in my passport: mother Russian, father Pole. When I started objecting that my father was never a Pole he was a Czech she (no doubt because she doesn't know one foreign name from another) she said to me based on the fact that my grandfather on my father's side was called Franz she said quite categorically 'I'm going to put down Pole and that's it. If you don't like it you can do without a passport at all.' I implore the Supreme Soviet to process my request as quickly and understandingly as possible and to help me. Who gave rude bureaucrats the right to wish a different nation on us.

I am a worker at the typography of *Shlyakh sotsializma* newspaper and a shock worker and a Komsomol member since 1921 half-Russian and half-Czech and I don't want to be called something I'm not a half Pole.

And I request you to relieve me of it.

(6. III-39)

The character of the petitions is well conveyed by this example, but here are some complementary examples from others:

Respected comrade secretary!

Recently I was supposed to be confirmed as a candidate member of the VKP(b) [All-Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)] at the general meeting of the works Party organisation, only when they were going through it I was accused of hiding my real nationality. This is how things stand: My grandfathers on my mother and father's side, my mother, my father, and I were all born in Belorussia, but our religious affiliation was

Roman Catholic (in the old days). So based on that I am now being told I'm a Pole, while my parents and me always gave ourselves as Belorussians and thought of ourselves as that and no-one ever said that wasn't right.

I request you to issue a response with regards to what nationality I should be, but my former religion shouldn't be the basis of my nationality. If it was then any Frenchman would be a Pole because of being a Catholic. (Stanislav Stepanovich Zalivako).<sup>17</sup>

Please answer my question. Can I consider my wife to be a Russian subject and must she change her nationality because of her origins? My wife is an Estonian from Gdov district in Leningrad province she's lived all her life there since she was born and her parents too before the revolution and after. But they've been telling me that if she I mean my wife isn't an Estonian subject then she shouldn't have her nationality as Estonian in her passport cos neither she nor her parents have anything to do with Estonia in the sense of the place existing since the revolution (Chibisov F. I.).<sup>18</sup>

My granddad who passed away long before I was born was I am very sorry to say by nationality a Greek. That nationality passed to my father by descent who practically grew up and died in Russia and had nothing in common with the Greek nationality at all.

I was born in the Soviet Union, studied here, grew up here, my mother is a Ukrainian. I have the passport of a citizen of the Soviet Union, I am on the list for military service in the Red Army and everywhere I am hounded by the black mark [crossed out] nationality – Greek. Wishing that in my documents I could have recorded the nationality that reflects reality – Russian. (N. M. Magula).<sup>19</sup>

Most of the appellants headed their texts *Zayavlenie* [Declaration], but in some, no indication of the genre was given, and they launched straight into the address: 'To the Supreme Soviet of the USSR', 'To the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR', 'To dear Comrade Stalin', 'To Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin', etc. The key word is always *request*, because that is the only imaginable kind of relationship you can have with authority: you can only ask, not require, let alone demand.<sup>20</sup> Of course, these conventions of genre were of crucial importance, and the petitioners' need to espouse the necessary rhetoric opened up a gulf between their self-portraits and reality. All the same, the arguments used by the letter-writers allow one to draw some inferences about their understanding of nationality.

Most often, petitioners' assignation of themselves to a particular nationality was based on their origins, in two senses: genealogical (who their parents and more generally ancestors were) and geographical (was born in Poland, Estonia, Lithuania). In the latter case, nationality could be equated with the country of which a given person was a subject (citizen).

On some occasions, nationality was equated with language, upbringing, customs and more broadly, culture. Sometimes religion was mentioned. And

then one sometimes got what might, so to speak, be called the 'scientific' approach, as in this letter from a certain N. V. Grushkovsky:

I request you to Give an Explanation of whether I have decided on the right nationality. By reading the works of Marx I grasped that the nation is a historically determined, stable community defined by language, territory, economic life, and cast of mind, as expressed also in the community of culture [ ... ] My father was born on the territory of Volhynia province. [ ... ] After he had finished military service, he married an Orthodox woman and so he changed his nation. [ ... ] within his passport<sup>21</sup> and his military ID card his religion is given as Orthodox. My mother is a Ukrainian. I was born in 1911. Until 1930 I lived on the territory of my birthplace the Belorussian SSR. The community of language and culture I share is Belorussian no doubt of it. So I also consider myself to be one of the Belorussians. And me and my brothers and sisters we all give ourselves as Belorussians in our documents. But when I was applying to be a candidate member of the Communist Party they asked me why aren't I a Pole? Of course there's nothing Polish about me or in our family neither. Why should I be a Pole by nationality? The Bureau of the City Party Committee of the town of Stalino objected to accepting me as a candidate member of the CP(B) [Communist Party (Bolsheviks)] because I hadn't given my nation right and put down Belorussian in the form [ ... ] And now I'm stuck. I don't know who I am by nationality Pole or Belorussian. [ ... ] It's all the same to me whatever nationality I am Pole Belorussian Jew. All I mind is I get good reports at work. And that till the end of my life I should be faithful (to the end of my life) [sic.] to the cause of the Party of Lenin and Stalin [ ... ] I request the chamber the Council of Nationalities to send me an answer what nation should I be from (Grushkovsky N. V.).<sup>22</sup>

Notable in this unusually elaborate text is the presence of a quotation from higher authority:

By reading the works of Marx I grasped that the nation is a historically constituted, stable community of language, territory, economic life and cast of mind, as expressing itself in the community of culture.<sup>23</sup>

Grushkovsky, who was responding to an accusation that he had concealed his true nationality as a Pole, an accusation that had led to a refusal to accept his application to join the Communist Party, had obvious reasons for demonstrating his familiarity with the canonical texts. At the same time, his main arguments were the standard ones – genealogical and geographical origin, religion, language and culture:

My father was born on the territory of Volhynia province. [ ... ] After he had finished military service, he married an Orthodox woman and so he

changed his nation. [ ... ] within his passport and his military ID card his religion is given as Orthodox. My mother is a Ukrainian.

Grushkovsky also noted that he too had been born in Belorussia and had lived there till 1930. He concluded his letter by throwing himself on the mercy of the Supreme Soviet with an appeal to Soviet internationalism:

It's all the same to me whatever nationality I am Pole Belorussian Jew. All I mind is I get good reports at work. And that till the end of my life I should be faithful (to the end of my life) [sic.] to the cause of the Party of Lenin and Stalin [ ... ] I request the chamber the Council of Nationalities to send me an answer what nation should I be from.<sup>24</sup>

The phrase, 'all the same to me' was intended for rhetorical effect. The very act of writing to the Supreme Soviet indicated the opposite (and the letter also laboriously described the many other places that Grushkovsky had petitioned before he got that far). What Grushkovsky evidently meant to emphasise was that the nationality question, vital as it was, was nevertheless not as important as loyalty to the Party – the Party to which he was denied entry on the grounds that he was suspected of concealing his 'true' nationality.

One way and another, in the different letters addressed to the Supreme Soviet (and in the case of Grushkovsky's petition, within just one document) it is possible to see a whole range of different understandings of what constitutes nationality. But the same criteria come up repeatedly: origins, language, religious confession, customs, culture.

These letters to the Supreme Soviet are interesting for a variety of different reasons. To begin with, there are no earlier cases of petitions on matters to do with the passport that address the issue of nationality. The letters also point to the fact that (contrary to the letter of the regulations) the passport holders had not been allowed to decide which nationality to choose for themselves, but had it 'wished upon' them. And finally, all the letters sent to the Supreme Soviet at this period were from representatives of 'external' nationalities, from those who in the terminology of the secret police were known as 'persons holding the nationality of foreign states', or sometimes simply as 'nationalities' pure and simple – Poles, Greeks, Germans, Estonians. It is natural to wonder what caused the writers to send their petitions at this particular point. Why should they have had problems, given that nationality was supposed to be determined on the basis of the passport-holder's own statements? And why was it so important to avoid having an 'external' nationality ascribed?

### **The practices of passport management**

When obtaining a passport, one had to complete a form with biographical information, basing one's replies on the so-called 'metrical records' or 'household books'.<sup>25</sup> However, before 1917, there was no state system of registration, and the 'metrical records' were the responsibility of religious denominations. They accordingly specified the faith that the child had been

born into, but not his or her nationality. If the applicant for a passport no longer had a copy of his or her 'metrical record' (as commonly happened), the 'household books' would be used to make up the deficiency. But these included neither records of nationality, nor indeed of religion (the recording of which had been explicitly prohibited in 1918). So, when passport officials imposed 'some other' nationality on an applicant, they had no legislative basis for doing this, there being no evidence about what his or her 'correct' nationality actually was. Of course, there may have been cases where officials made decisions by proceeding on the basis of what an applicant had written in his or her form, and told a person that if he was born in Ukraine, he was a Ukrainian, or that if she was born in Belorussia, then she should count as Belorussian. One of the letters in the file seems to suggest exactly this:

I request you to restore my nationality. I was born in 1885 in Poland in the town of Sandomir, my parents are Russian, during the Imperial War [i.e. World War I] I moved to my husbands homeland and now I live in Odessa, but when they were making out my passport and I didn't have a metrical certificate, they obviously decided that if I was born in Poland, they put down my nationality as Polish, when I went to get my passport I told them that isn't my nationality, I'm Russian, I'm not a Pole, and they told me same difference, we [in the Soviet Union] don't have any nationalities ...<sup>26</sup>

The response recorded by this woman is highly characteristic. It was in fact the case that when the first Soviet passports were given out in 1933, nationality was the least of any official's concerns. Applicants themselves had other anxieties as well, the first of which was whether they would be allocated passports at all.<sup>27</sup> People were also convinced that the category of 'nationality' was to all intents and purposes meaningless in a country that proclaimed itself the capital of internationalism. At the same time, the emphasis on *inherited* origins was something familiar to them – responding to questions about one's class origins by referring to the social background of one's parents (particularly father) was standard practice by the late 1920s.<sup>28</sup>

The fact that passport officials sometimes made mistakes or imposed their own authority when they should not have is obviously not sufficient explanation for people's desperate desire to 'change nationality'. The emphasis that the petitioners placed on the amount of effort they had already expended on trying to get something done about their problems, not to speak of their insistence in asserting that they were not Poles, Greeks, and so on, is already an indication of how important the issue of nationality was to them.

The other side of the dialogue – the response from the authorities – is harder to pin down. Almost no evidence is available about this. One has the impression that the officials in the Supreme Soviet were uncertain about how to treat these cases; at any rate, in none of them is a decision recorded. On the other hand, the file does contain the following memo (written on the

letterhead of the Reception Centre [*Priemnaya*]<sup>29</sup> of the President of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, M. I. Kalinin):

Comrade Arkhipov!

The question about nationality may at first sight seem trivial, but it seems to me it has a general principled significance.<sup>30</sup> Our reception centre is unable to provide one or other interpretation. Hence, I am sending this for you<sup>31</sup> to have a look at yourself.<sup>32</sup>

But the letters kept on coming in, which seems, in turn, to have prompted the Supreme Soviet to consult with the All-Soviet Legal Academy. The Academy's answer has survived, and deserves quoting at length, since it gives a strong sense of the strategies employed by academic institutions when put on the spot by the organs of political power:

The Department of Civil Law has discussed the question of whether it is possible to engage in court action with reference to the determination of nationality. Following the discussion, two opposing viewpoints emerged.

Some members of the Department held that court action of this kind is not possible. In accordance with Article 123 of the Stalinist Constitution, the question of nationality has no juridical significance and has no implications in law. Further, court action of this kind has never been heard of.

The members of the Department holding this view were, however, also of the opinion that Soviet citizens whose nationality had been incorrectly determined in official documents (such as the passport) would be entitled to demand through administrative channels that the errors should be corrected. Such a demand would automatically have to be honoured, since the nationality of a passport-holder is determined, in law, on the basis of his or her own statement of what that nationality might be.

For their part, other members of the Department do consider that Soviet citizens would be entitled to serve a writ requiring the determination of their nationality. They support this case by referring to the fact that, while Soviet Law does not permit any restrictions to be imposed or advantages allowed on the basis of nationality, the question of nationality is not a matter of total legal indifference. We have a whole range of regulations concerning aid to backward nationalities, the rights of national minorities, and so on. These include, for example, the norms relating to the language used in legal hearings, the quotas for national minorities in institutions of higher education in major cities, and so on and so on.

Those members of the Department holding this view consider that serving a writ with regard to the determination of nationality is possible in law, and accords with accepted legal practice.<sup>33</sup>

The Delphic Oracle could hardly have put it more cryptically. On the one hand, the legal experts indicated their familiarity with the regulations

stipulating that 'nationality is recorded in documents exclusively on the basis of the citizen's own declaration of what he or she deems his or her nationality to be'. But they also made clear their awareness that these legal norms were functioning in a rather peculiar way, and so they allowed the possibility of serving a writ requiring the determination of one's nationality by the authorities (the issue of the basis on which such a writ might have been served was not addressed). This ambiguity was not resolved, and it seems more than possible that the conflict between the different answers had a cause that was not so much to do with the intricacies of the law as with the fact that the members of the Department of Civil Law did not know what answers they were expected to give, and so 'covered their backs' by providing a response that was diplomatically indeterminate.

Thus, the significance of nationality in high politics was still, as of late 1938, not fully resolved. However, this was a time when the subject was becoming steadily more important. By the mid-1930s, the image of the Soviet Union as a country surrounded by enemies was starting to be pervasive. 'Stalin himself', in the words of N. V. Petrov and A. B. Roginsky, 'saw the Soviet frontier as a kind of continuous front line.' The countries whose territories bordered the USSR were 'carrying out a never-ending campaign of subversion (an unavoidable fact of life, in Stalin's view, since inter-state relations were always antagonistic, and particularly between neighbouring states). That is, the conditions along the Soviet borders essentially amounted to undercover war – which would all too soon come out in the open' (Petrov and Roginsky 1997). The well-known obsession of the NKVD with suppressing 'espionage' and 'diversion' was a wholly logical consequence of this perception of international relations.<sup>34</sup>

The first nationality to bear the brunt were the Poles.<sup>35</sup> In August 1937 was promulgated the so-called 'Polish Decree', initiating police operations to round up supposed subversives on the basis of nationality. The text of the Decree referred to the activation of Polish espionage on Soviet territory and on the measures being taken to 'render harmless' (*obezvrezhivat*) those engaging in espionage, diversionary, wrecking, and the incitement of social unrest. 'Despite the fact that the Decree referred to "Polish spies", rather than to ethnic Poles as such, the result was to place under suspicion almost the entire Polish population of the USSR' (Petrov and Roginsky 1997). Thus, while in theory Polish spies did not have to be Poles (or Greek spies, those of Greek descent, etc.), the purge had a totalising character.

How the efforts to 'render the spy network harmless' worked on the ground is clear from eyewitness testimony. Here, for example, is an extract from a family history, describing the fate of the author's grandfather and his family:

They lived in Smolensk. Granddad's brother was married to a Pole called Jadwiga. She was an orphan, brought up by her aunties. Everyone remembers what a lovely woman she was, they used to call her Dosenka in the family. She worked as a nurse. Then, in 1937, she was arrested. Her

crime was owning a radio set and having relatives in bourgeois Poland. She got 10 years. After she got out, she was living in Solikamsk. Either she was officially in exile, or she couldn't manage to get back for some other reason. Finally, she did manage to return to Smolensk, in 1958 or 1959, but she died not long after. All I have left as a memento is her *Medical Guide for Orderlies*, published in 1948.

Her husband, my granddad's brother, he soon got arrested as well. He spent a year in jail, but they never put him on trial, and then they let him out. He was lucky. They had a little wooden house, but it was taken away. He had nowhere to live, so he moved in with granddad, got a job as a book-keeper in a canteen. In 1941, he hung back and didn't join the evacuation straight away, he had things to finish up in the canteen. Before he could leave, the Germans got there, and that was the last we ever heard of him. He must have got killed. None of them could understand why the Soviets had arrested poor Jadwiga, who never hurt a fly, and then kept her husband in prison. Now we know they were lucky it wasn't worse.<sup>36</sup>

In provincial archives, a great deal of evidence has survived of how NKVD operatives, under pressure to comply with norms for the number of 'Polish spies' rounded up and arrested, would get hold of members of other nationalities and sign them up as Poles under physical duress.<sup>37</sup> 'In compliance with the order issued by Volsky, a senior officer in the Donetsk Directorate of the NKVD, 60 arrestees of Ukrainian, Belorussian, and Russian origin were beaten into stating that they were actually Poles.'<sup>38</sup>

The NKVD operatives suspected that Poles had exploited the right to define their own nationality, and signed up as Russians and Belorussians:

Since the records from the 1930s were incomplete, the Chekists lacked full information about Soviet citizens who were not of Russian nationality. There were not even full records of Polish citizens who had voluntarily resettled in the USSR. As a result, a full-scale operation to track down 'non-Soviet nationals' was mounted, using evidence from outside police records as well as from these. For example, Vatslav Gridyushko, an operative of the Counter-Revolutionary Section of the Novosibirsk Regional Directorate of the NKVD posed as an electrician in order to gain access to the household books in the district, and compiled a list of 8–10 non-Russian families every day (that's the way you get the quotas fulfilled – if you don't have an electrician to supply that information, you're sunk!) Exactly the same strategy was used in the other parts of the province (Moshkovsky district) and in Barnaul – where they saved themselves trouble by simply making lists of everyone whose family ended in 'sky'.

(Archive of the Directorate of the Federal Security Service, Novosibirsk Province (A UFSB NO), file Д.П-4505, 1.352)<sup>39</sup>

The secret police were determined to clarify the situation with regard to nationality, and this was duly done, in a document under the heading, TOP SECRET:

To: All Heads of Registration Sections (OAGS), NKVD and Directorate of the NKVD:

Circular No. 65 of the NKVD dated 2 April 1938 (circulated to heads of the Directorate of the Worker and Peasant Militia) has instituted new procedures for the determination of nationality when passports are issued or renewed. According to these, the sole criterion for the registration of nationality is to be the applicant's nationality by descent (i.e. parental nationality).

In connection with this, the established procedure, according to which nationality was recorded on the grounds of the applicant's own statement of his or her nationality, has now been abolished.

In all official records, the nationality shown must reflect the nationality as stated in the passport presented by the applicant at the time of registration.

In cases where the applicant is not already in possession of a passport, the issue of nationality is clarified at the point when the registration takes place, on the basis of cross-questioning of the applicant. It should be borne in mind that registration of nationality must reflect the national origins of the applicant's parents. If the applicant's parents were Germans, Poles, etc., then place of birth, length of residence in the USSR, or the adoption of Soviet citizenship do not constitute a reason to register the person concerned as Russian, Belorussian, etc.

In cases where the nationality indicated does not correspond to the native language or surname of the person concerned – for example, in cases where the surname of the applicant is Papandopoulo or Müller, and he or she claims to be Russian or Belorussian, and it does not prove possible to establish what the real nationality of the applicant is, then the 'nationality' rubric is not completed until the applicant is able to present documentary evidence of the nationality to which he or she actually belongs.<sup>40</sup>

The authors of the petitions to the Supreme Soviet naturally had no idea of the existence of this secret circular, but they did have every awareness that being a Pole, Greek, German etc. was now extremely dangerous. Changing one's nationality, however, was no longer possible: it was determined according to parental background, which in fact meant according to your name, surname, and so on (since at that point in Soviet history, there was no documentary evidence of parental nationality in existence). For their part, the passport offices, with the backing of the new circular, were able to begin a detailed 'inventory' of those belonging to 'external' nationalities.

The gap between the period when it was possible to select one's own nationality at will, and the period when compulsory registration 'according to descent' was instituted (i.e. the move to a concept of nationality as something

inherited and inalienable) was, therefore, much shorter than printed sources would suggest – not 21 years, but six, and the alteration in practices is directly traceable to the exigencies of political repression.

The case also provides an exemplary illustration of how the double system of legal regulation in the USSR functioned. Outwardly, the original 'Decree', according to which the 'nationality' rubric was completed in line with the applicant's own statement, remained in force. But Soviet citizens soon learned that it was less helpful to rely on the letter of the law than to go by the practices that officials were actually using. Passport clerks started to demand that Soviet citizens with 'suspect' names and surnames, and other uncomfortable biographical details, should provide documentation of their parents' nationality. All of this filtered down the system long before the public alteration to the procedures of passport registration in 1953. One could say that the content of the 'top secret' circular was made clear to rank-and-file Soviet citizens by the behaviour of officials and came as no surprise to these citizens, who by the late 1930s had already had experience in the functioning of Soviet legal practice on the ground. What is more, the procedure of establishing nationality 'by a person's parents' rapidly came into general force, and started being used not just for 'suspicious' cases, but for all citizens.

This article has shown how the introduction of 'nationality' as one of the ascriptive characteristics in the Soviet passport (national identity card) was followed by uncertainty about appropriate ways to express ethnic affiliation. As in the case of state censuses, Soviet citizens struggled to adapt to official categorisations and to maximise benefit to themselves (and minimise harm) in their self-descriptions. When local officials imposed categories they saw as inappropriate, they went 'up the line', attempting to negotiate identities that would be suitable both in official terms, and in their own eyes. At the same time, this process was accompanied by an increasingly sharp awareness of the importance of this category of personal description, and of the rationale behind it. From the behaviour of officials, passport holders were able to 'read' the content of secret circulars and to grasp some of the procedures of the second layer of legality governing their lives. In a remarkably short time, 'nationality' was transformed from an essentially optional and vague category into something extremely definite and clear: a characteristic that defined every person from his or her birth and that was inherited from his or her parents. Not coincidentally, this was the way that the majority of citizens of Russia saw the situation in the post-Soviet period too: nationality, in their view, was 'in the blood' and was not a cultural, but a biological feature.<sup>41</sup>

## Notes

- 1 This article was written specially for this collection. The research for it was supported by the AHRC as part of the project, 'Russian National Identity since 1961: Traditions and Deterritorialisation' (2007–11). Our thanks to the project participants, particularly Dr Andy Byford, for useful discussions.

- 2 The word *pravo* is broader than any single English term. In some contexts it is appropriately translated by the word 'right' (*pravo na trud*, 'the right to work'), in others by the word 'law', 'legal system', 'legality', or 'justice' (*kretyanskoe pravo*, 'serf system', *pravo-2*, 'legality-2'), and in yet others by the word 'authority' (*my ne imeem prava* 'we don't have the authority to ...'). [Editors]
- 3 On the history of the Russian estates, see e.g. (Freeze 1986).
- 4 The process by which nationality came to be the primary identifying factor in the final decades of the Russian Empire's existence has been extensively studied. See particularly (Steinwedel 2001; Cadiot 2005).
- 5 As A. A. Melenberg observes (Melenberg 1998: 127): 'P. A. Zaionchkovsky, who had an expert knowledge of such topics, emphasised, in his analysis of the Russian officer corps in the First World War, that the rubric *Nationality* did not exist, being replaced by the rubric *Religious confession*. However, in the 1912 *Annual of Military Statistics for the Russian Army* [Voenno-statisticheskii ezhegodnik armii na 1912 god], the rubric *Nationality* did appear. According to Zaionchkovsky: "The Russian Army was to a high degree stable in terms of its ethnic [*natsionalnyi*] composition. The overwhelming majority of officers (over 86 per cent) were Russian. (As was customary at the time, these included Ukrainians and Belorussians.) If one compares the 1912 figures with the 1903 figures, only two changes can be remarked: the proportion of generals of Polish origin had dropped slightly (from 3.8 per cent to 3.3 per cent), as had the proportion of Germans (from 10.3 per cent to 6.5 per cent)". According to the evidence of the *Annual*, 61 out of 1299 generals were Germans (6.55 per cent), and 63 Protestants (6.76 per cent); and respectively 212 and 218 staff officers out of 8340 (3.26 per cent and 3.3 per cent), and 878 and 949 officers in the lower ranks [*oberofitseriy*, holding the ranks of cornet to major – Trans.] (2.61 per cent and 2.82 per cent). The category 'Protestant' included Lutherans, evangelical Christians, and members of the Reformed Church. The statistics make clear that Zaionchkovsky, like the compilers of the *Annual*, simply assumed that all Lutherans were Germans, and conversely, that all members of the Russian Orthodox Church were Russian. But if we turn to the actual lists, we find that those given as "Russian" include the following: Hüber von Greifenfels, Schaffhausen-Schönberg-Eck-Schaufuss, Graf Grabbe, Baron Budberg, Baron von Mehrscheid-Gillesen, Baron Stahl von Holstein, Baron Meyendorff, Baron Fitinhof, Baron von Hettelhorst, Baron von Medem, Baron Ixkul von Hildebrand, and also Schmidt, Vogel, Flug, Siewere, Elsner, Schulz, Hartwig, Olderogge, Scheideman and others. All of these were listed as "Russian" because they had given themselves as "Orthodox".'
- 6 In this context, it is interesting to note the petitions by Mazurs and Ingrians to the Supreme Soviet with requests to 'legitimise' their *natsionalnost* (State Archive of the Russian Federation (henceforth GARF), f. 7523, op. 9, ed. khr. 99, l. 21, l. 23).
- 7 There were 14 questions included in the census form: 1) surname, name, patronymic or nickname (the blind, deaf and dumb – the deaf were not counted as a separate category – and mentally incapable were to be noted as such here); 2) sex; 3) relationship with the head of the family and head of household; 4) age; 5) marital status and number of children (if any); 6) social estate and social position or title; 7) place of birth; 8) place where registered; 9) place of usual residence; 10) present or absent at time census carried out; 11) religion; 12) native language; 13) literacy; 14) occupation: craft or trade, nature of profession or service, main occupation and other occupations to be noted separately. Military service and physical infirmities (other than blindness and incapacity to speak) were also to be noted here. When the form was completed, the head of the family was always noted first, followed by all the other members of the family in order of their relationship to him: wife, sons, daughters (or children in order of age), husbands and wives of grown children, grandchildren, mother and father (if beyond the age to be considered heads of the

- family), brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces, uncles and aunts, etc. In the case of daughters-in-law, grandchildren and nephews and nieces, additional information about the nature of the family relationships was included.
- 8 'V. P. Semenov-Tian-Shansky, the chairman of the subcommittee on the census, prepared a list of five questions to help the census officials determine what a respondent's nationality might be. In line with this, the officials were supposed to establish the nationality of the respondent's parents, the religion "that he was born into", the language that he had spoken as a child, and also the language that he now used at home, and finally, the level of his knowledge of Russian.' (Sokolovskiy 2002).
- 9 Ibid. On the contribution made by ethnographers to the construction of 'nationality', see also (Hirsch 1997); on the Sarts (Abashin 2009).
- 10 On 'national construction', see (Hirsch 2005; Martin 2001; Slezkine 1994; Weitz 2002).
- 11 Anti-discrimination legislation began to be introduced under the Provisional Government (e.g. the 'Decree on the Abolition of Religious and National Restrictions' of 20 March 1917) and the process continued after the October Revolution. For the 1918 stipulation that 'all indication of religious affiliation, or the absence of this, is to be removed from official documents of all kinds', see the 'Decree on the Separation of Church and State and School and Church' [Dekret SNK RSFSR 23 January 1918] (*Sobranie* 1919: no. 18, statute 263).
- 12 *Izhdevenets*: i.e. someone financially supported by another person (such as an elderly relative, non-working adult child, etc.). [Editors]
- 13 GARF, f. 7523, op. 99, d. 9.
- 14 Ibid., l. 37. Here and below, the translation attempts to convey a sense of the orthographical, grammatical, and stylistic peculiarities of the Russian originals. The departures from the norms of educated Russian are, it should be said, characteristic for native speakers from non-intellectual backgrounds, rather than pointing to the fact that the letter-writers had traits of language use associated with 'non-Soviet' nationalities. [Editors]
- 15 The Path of Socialism (*shlyakh* is an archaic word for a route, which in recent times has persisted in southern Russian dialects). [Editors]
- 16 The standard term for a petition or solicitation in the Soviet period was *zayavlenie* [literally, 'Declaration'], replacing the pre-revolutionary term, *proshenie* [from *prosit'*, to request]. Despite the more assertive ring of their title, these 'declarations' were, as the author points out, phrased 'I request', rather than, for instance, 'I demand'; for this reason, in the discussion of these texts here, the English word 'petition' has been preferred. [Editors]
- 17 Ibid., l. 26
- 18 Ibid., l. 18.
- 19 Ibid., l. 43.
- 20 On the rhetoric of petitioning in the Stalin era, see e.g. (Fitzpatrick 1996; Alexopoulos 1999).
- 21 In the original, 'u pasporte' – a case of contamination from Belorussian. [Editors]
- 22 GARF, f. 7523, op. 99, d. 9, l. 15.
- 23 In fact, the quotation does not come from Marx. It is a slightly inexact quotation from Stalin's 1913 treatise, *Marxism and the National Question*, Chapter 1 (Stalin 1946: 293): 'The nation is a historically constituted, stable community that emerges on the basis of language, territory, economic life and cast of mind, expressing itself in the community of culture.' This no doubt deliberate mistake, in which Marx is credited with adumbrating Stalin's views, testifies to the significance of Stalin's article as a key text in Soviet national relations, and also to the petitioner's knowledge of the leader's writings, which was supposed to give additional weight to his arguments.

- 24 Undated. 9 November 1938 by stamp of receipt. GARF, f. 7523, op. 99, d. 9, ll. 15–16.
- 25 The ‘metrical records’ were records of births, christenings (or other religious naming ceremonies), marriages, deaths and funerals. The ‘household books’ held information about the persons registered at a given address. [Editors]
- 26 GARF, f. 7523, op. 99, d. 9, ll. 24–24 ob.
- 27 The process of issuing passports was used as a form of ‘social filtering’, and those who belonged to ‘socially hostile groups’, such as former aristocrats or merchants, officers in the Tsarist army, members of the clergy, delinquents and vagrants, along with much of the rural population, often had their applications refused, a step that was usually a preliminary to internal exile. See (Baiburin 2012).
- 28 For example, in 1930, a report from the ‘Old St Petersburg – New Leningrad Society’ included a list of 11 members of the Society’s Council. Of these, two specified class origin by reference to category: ‘*iz meshchan*’ (‘from plebeian townsdwellers’), ‘*dvoryanin*’ (‘gentleman’). The other nine referred to descent: ‘son of a worker’, ‘son of a private tutor’, ‘son of an official’, etc. (‘Spisok chlenov Soveta Obshchestva’, Central State Archive, St Petersburg (TsGA-SPb.), f. 1000, op. 48, d. 99, ll. 11–12).
- 29 ‘Reception centre’ refers to the department of a public organisation, such as a ministry or Party authority, deputed to work with the general public (by answering letters, forwarding petitions to the relevant department, and so on). [Editors]
- 30 i.e. ‘a general significance’. The writer used the figure *pritsipialnoe obshchee znachenie* instead of the customary *printsipialno vazhnoe znachenie* (‘a considerable significance in principle’), but evidently had in mind that large numbers of people were expressing anxiety about the question of nationality.
- 31 The informal word for ‘you’ (*ty*, ‘thou’) is used, as was customary in Party circles, particularly from superiors to inferiors. [Editors]
- 32 GARF, f. 7523, op. 99, d. 9, l. 29.
- 33 *Ibid.*, ll. 14–15. The document bears the signature of the Chairman of the Department of Civil Law (Liptsker), and is dated 15 October 1938. In the top left-hand corner is a hand-written note: ‘Case material’ (signature indecipherable).
- 34 See also (Martin 1998: 846–56), which gives a detailed account of the shift in policy from the provision of advantageous conditions to minority nationalities in the 1920s to the targeting of diaspora populations from 1933 on. The institutional role of passportisation in the ‘national operations’ of the NKVD is discussed, with reference to police officials’ understanding of the categories rather than the self-perception of members of minority nationalities, in (Shearer 2009: 243–84) and (Hagenloh 2009: 296–305). Deportations of the Tsarist period are discussed in (Lohr 2003).
- 35 The exile of some ethnic groups began earlier, for example, the Finns began to be expelled from Leningrad province in 1935, but this was done as part of the campaign for dekulakization.
- 36 The material is presented in the blog at <http://corporatellie.livejournal.com/15053.html>
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 ‘Iz istorii “national’nogo voprosa” v SSSR’ (*Memorial-Aspekt* 1994:12).
- 40 As Dmitry Khmel’nitsky puts it, ‘It was never directly asserted in Soviet textbooks etc. that national identity had biological foundations, but the conviction that this was so was pretty well universal. And the term “mixed marriage” still has a racist resonance: it is used to refer to a marriage of individuals from different [ethnic] origins (“nationalities”), even if the husband and wife come from the same culture and have no other [as might happen, say, with Russians whose Ukrainian and German ancestors had lived in Russia since the 1800s]. And most Russians would assume that the statement that someone who is unusually swarthy or has slanting eyes may come from any national group was meant as a joke.’ (Khmel’nitsky 2010). (For confirmation of this, see e.g. the forum, ‘Chto opredelyaet natsionalnost –

krov ili kultura?’, <http://wap.rrr.b.qip.ru/?1-4-40-00000104-000-10001-0.>) In 1991, the then eminently liberal newspaper *Vechernii Leningrad* published an item about the daughter of the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and Elizaveta Zibert (also known as Ellie Jones), Patricia Thompson (alternatively, Elena Vladimirovna). She had been born in the United States, educated there, had never lived in Russia, and spoke no Russian. However, the journalist constantly insisted on her Russianness, ending the article thus: ‘I look at Vladimir Mayakovsky’s daughter as she departs, and I cannot see anything American about her’ (Alekaeva 1991). On the other hand, since the late 1990s, the government of the Russian Federation has been actively promoting a different understanding, as expressed both in the official term *rossiiskii* (someone with Russian citizenship), and in the concept of *sootchestvennik* (a looser term, cf. ‘compatriot’). In the latter concept, both (legal) citizenship and (primordial) ethnicity are essentially sidestepped: ‘loyalty to the Russian Federation as a state’ replaces citizenship and ‘loyalty to Russian culture’ (however vaguely, diversely, abstractly and provisionally this might be understood, to include simply the promotion of this culture outside Russian borders) replaces ethnicity. See e.g. (Byford 2012; Kostomarskaya 2006; Laruelle 2006, 2008).

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## 4 The queue as narrative A Soviet case study<sup>1</sup>

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To sum up social development, in a short space of time, is more difficult than summing up the economy – the dynamic of social progress cannot always be represented in figures.

(Brezhnev 1979: 575)

The face of the queue is hypertensive, red-white.

(Gorenshtein 1997: 146)

The queue was a constant and immediately recognisable attribute of Soviet everyday life. In ideological terms, it signified the 'temporary' hardships the country was facing. For those having to queue, it was an inescapable quotidian ritual, a waste of time, and a source of irritation. If queues exist across time and space, they nevertheless had a special or, at the very least, fairly specific role to play in the life of the Soviet individual. Right up until the 1990s, the phenomenon of the queue caught the attention of Soviet citizens and foreigners, in particular, those among them who were able to compare the living conditions in their home countries with those in the USSR.<sup>2</sup> Today, things have changed: queues are less common, and, most importantly, the very concept of the queue has ceased to occupy the place in social discourse that it did back then. In sociological terms, this is reason enough for further discussion.

Obviously, changes to the economic and political life of a society do not necessarily signify immediate changes to the forms of self-identification of the people who make up that society. To what extent does the transformation represented by the social changes that took place in the former Soviet Union (the disappearance of Soviet symbolism or the shifts in phraseology, for example) fit with people's established psychology, the character of the cultural tradition itself? Before trying to answer this (essentially, sociological) question, it might be useful, in more ways than one, to borrow from the methodological tools of the folklorist/ethnographer. By 'folklore' I mean here not only fairytales, epic poems, legends, and so on, but also the 'common places' of collectively meaningful experience, rules and taboos, jokes and rhetorical clichés, everyday sayings, adages, citations, and authoritative cross-referencing. In this sense, folklore is a realm of meaning where specialised everyday discourses