**Book Review: *National Identities in Soviet Historiography: The Rise of Nations Under Stalin* by Harun Yilmaz**

**Module: SEES0052: Historical Methods and Approaches**

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**Candidate Number: RYFJ4**

**Word Count: 1,490**

**Date of Submission: Tuesday 29th March 2022 (1 Week SoRA Extension)**

*Harun Yilmaz, National Identities in Soviet Historiography: The Rise of Nations Under Stalin (London: Routledge, 2015)*

The question of nationhood, and how it problematised Soviet hegemonic power, has being subject to increased historical inquiry in recent years. In this contribution to the field, Harun Yilmaz attempts to specifically understand how nationhood itself was constructed within the narratives of Stalinist historiography and explain how ideas of nationhood changed between the rise of Stalin and the end of World War II, using the examples of Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan to establish how Soviet historians shaped the nation-building process. The book is divided into two sections; the first focusing on building Stalinist national histories of these example nations, and the second focusing on the role of these narratives in the wartime period. Yilmaz provides an informative background on how historical approaches changed under Lenin, and how Stalin introduced a more forgiving revisionist approach to the history of the Russian Empire. Under the ”lesser evil” formula Yilmaz describes, the Leninist condemnation of Russian imperialism shifted to a more apologetic depiction of a Russian Empire which allowed its conquered peoples to maintain and develop their culture. Yilmaz then introduces his argument that despite Stalin’s understandable reputation as a persecutor of nations, the Stalinist project was an integral part of building national identity within the constituent republics of the USSR.

Yilmaz explains how national histories were rooted in M.N. Pokrovskii’s historiography, where a class-based analysis of national history was prioritised. Pokrovskii reinterpreted peasant rebellions led by folk heroes as being proto-socialist rebellions against Russian imperialism; believing that a national consciousness was being formed here, even when their realities were often grounded in far more local, sub-national concerns. This became the dominant school until Stalin, and after the Soviet authorities rejected Pokrovskii for being unpatriotic, they struggled to find a new cohesive approach to history, with Yilmaz describing how Lazar Kaganovich admitted to a group of Ukrainian historians in 1947 that Pokrovskii’s approach was the only real school of history that the Soviet Union had ever had (172).

Lacking a consistent ideological framework, Soviet historiography then sought to connect the peoples of the Soviet Union to the territory they inhabited. The new nations of the USSR were named after the dominant ethnic group in most cases, so cohesive national identities had to be constructed for these peoples, particularly where they were previously lacking. The Stalinist conception of “socialist nations” emphasised their autochthonous ethnic roots within their territory, and archaeological remains and folk tales were used to legitimise this – seeking to bolster Soviet rule by establishing the legitimacy of each individual Soviet republic. The politics of Soviet power and patronage thus structured the course of nation-building projects within the republics, and following this, the number of historians, archaeologists, and linguists involved exploded.

Constructing Azeri national identity in opposition to Turkish and Persian identities aligned with Soviet anxieties around the power of pan-Turkism and regional rivalry with Turkey and Iran. Tsarist Russia had understood construct Azeris as being “Tatars” of the Caucasus, and only under Stalin’s nationality policy did the category of “Azerbaijanis” emerge. Azerbaijan lacked the distinctive linguistic and literary tradition of Georgian and Armenian nation-builders, so needed to forge a distinct identity separate from Turkey, which was itself constructing a competing Kemalist Turkish nationalism. The strong sense of nationhood constructed in contemporary Turkey and Iran necessitated an aggressive response from Soviet authorities to distinguish Azerbaijan and its people and history from its neighbours. Similarly, competition with Armenian and Georgian scholars prompted by territorial anxieties also informed the construction of a native Caucasian identity for the Azeri people by scholars of Azerbaijan, using folk heroes like Babak as an example of Azeri resistance to outside forces.

Beyond Azerbaijan, Ukrainian identity was particularly problematised by how much Ukrainian nationhood overlapped with and conflicted with Russian nationhood. Kinship between Russians and Ukrainians informed Soviet approaches to its history, and anxiety towards the influence of Poland upon Ukraine and its national consciousness drove a deep Soviet need to separate Ukrainian nationhood from conflicting Polish claims of kinship and heritage. Again, folk heroes like Khmel’nyts’kyi were celebrated as a symbol of local rejection of Western forces, and fraternity with Russia. Similarly, Kazakh batyrs were woven into a national myth which accompanied Russian identity – here the folk hero fought for the nation and the people in a way that did not compete with Russian goals. In the Stalin era, the emphasis on class shifted towards a new nationalist focus which prioritised local national narratives over socialist internationalism, reflecting the wider isolationist turn of Soviet foreign policy.

In the second half the book, the role of these national constructions in World War II is something Yilmaz weaves together compellingly. National security necessitated a strong foundational myth of Georgian-Azeri-Armenian fraternity to create a defensive wall at the border, and a distinct Ukrainian pan-Slavic territorial identity that could resist German invasion. Azeri and Ukrainian narratives were also extended to emphasise cross-border claims to Iran and Poland during the war. In the field of history, the war years allowed for a relaxation of previous taboos. Yilmaz traces a new discourse around Kazakh national identity resulting from the propaganda power of nationalism, where it was the product of needing to elevate resistance and militarism. Moreover, conflicts between historians shaped how this wartime historiography changed dramatically. The war created room for historical dissent, such as during WWII when Marxist internationalist historians sought to pass a resolution rejecting the Russocentric nationalist turn of wartime historiography (175), and this shift allowed a wider exchange of ideas between historians.

The question of censorship, and outright persecution of historians, recurs throughout the book. Yilmaz emphasises how Soviet policy sought to create a new intelligentsia unconstrained by exploitative class structures. History writing was initially tied to the production of the classed nation, and a distinctly proletarian historiography was sought, recruiting a new class of working-class *vidvyzhentsy* historians. But historians and their output were subject to ruthless control, and the potential for any alternative narratives to emerge was brutally supressed. This was usually carried out by a complex web of institutions and actors, but was often directed by Stalin himself to dictate a “correct” history (36). In one striking example, Ukrainian folk bards were killed, and Yilmaz suggests that the endurance of these Stalinist national narratives could be explained by this ruthless purge of alternate traditions. The ability of nations to tell their own stories was also destroyed, with the great terror purging Azerbaijan of all its eminent native historians, leaving its history to be constructed by non-Azerbaijanis. Thus, the force of repression, both subtly coercive and outright violent, led to a homogenisation of historical narratives by the state apparatus.

Yilmaz makes a convincing case that the enduring national identities shaped by Soviet historiography, and the deep resonance they carry today, demonstrate the long-term success of this nation-building project. He contends that interpreting the Soviet Union is problematised by how the political elites of its former republics have rewritten their Soviet past, with some radically revising it, and some reaffirming it. He points to the Baltic nations as an example of anti-communism becoming a foundational myth of post-Soviet nationhood, and touches upon how conflict over the legacy and iconography of the Soviet Union has informed the contemporary conflict in Ukraine. Clearly, Soviet historiographies have profound reverberations in our current landscape.

This book is a robust contribution to the field of historiography and national identity in the Soviet Union, building upon how recent historians have attempted revisit Stalinism as a phenomenon and to trace its trajectory through the processes of modernity, and reflects a welcome break from the old dichotomous “totalitarian” and “revisionist” approaches to Stalinism. It is well-researched and makes use of a wide variety of archives and texts from all the nations studied, and it is a pleasant contribution to the movement of Soviet historiography from focusing on the monolithic USSR towards understanding its individual republics and peoples, particularly those outside of Europe. Yilmaz successfully links nation-building and national history to the wider issues of power and ideology under Stalin, and illustrates the complexity of how national histories emerged and their value to the state.

Perhaps one of the book’s greatest weaknesses is an attempt to formally sever the Marxist-Leninist approach and the Stalinist approach without much attention to conflicts and contradictions that emerged in the transition from one to the other. Yilmaz also privileges the role of the historian, the state, and institutions over other forces of nation-building, such as the mobilisation and participation of ordinary citizens. Contemporary scholarship has increasingly sought to interpret Stalinism as a bottom-up as well as a top-down phenomenon, and this book would have been improved by a greater focus on the impact of non-state actors. Furthermore, the impact of these new historical narratives and their struggle with native traditions also could have been elaborated on further, with the agency of native peoples given greater weight. Nonetheless, it is an incredibly informative contribution to a growing post-revisionist field of work on Soviet nationhood.