

Ethnic Enclosure in Soviet and Post-Soviet School Textbooks

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we first explore the process of history writing and teaching in Soviet autonomies using the concept of ethnic enclosure as a framework to examine the way the distant past is presented in history textbooks published locally in the Soviet Union. We then show the conflicting character of ethnic historical narratives in the textbooks of rival ethnic groups and, next, discuss the legacy of the Soviet policy of ethnic enclosure as reflected in school textbooks published after the demise of the Soviet Union.

Recently, there has been a renewed interest among the scholars of ethnicity and nationalism to study the issues of inter-ethnic relations in the Soviet Union for the legacy of the Soviet nationality policy is considered one of the keys to understand the current unrest in many of the former Soviet territories¹. The fact is that in the Soviet Union, only a limited number of ethnic groups were given the right to have the highest form of autonomy, i.e. were granted a supreme form of an ethno-territorial unit, a Union Soviet Socialist Republic². These ethnic groups became “titular” nations in their republics. Other ethnic groups had to settle for one of the lower forms in the hierarchy of the Soviet ethno-territorial structure – an autonomous republic, an autonomous region or an autonomous district³. Also, there were ethnic groups who were not granted any of such status at all. However, the ethnic groups, who felt discriminated, never stopped the attempts to upgrade their status; and sometimes they needed to protect the status they already had from being downgraded.

¹ See, e.g., *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Special Issue 2005: Nation and Empire

² Fifteen in 1940, out of more than 120 officially recognized ethnic groups (Suny and Martin 2001, 5)

³ 20 autonomous republics, 8 autonomous regions and 10 autonomous districts in 1940 (Ibid, 5).

The political standing of one or another language was one of the most important indicators of how well the ethnic group was doing in usually bloodless but a very peculiar ethnic battlefield. That is because under the Soviet political settings language was considered to be the “primordialized” property of an ethnic group, and in order to be identified as an authentic ethnic group – a sine qua non of getting the desired status – it was necessary to show that the ethnic group in question had continued to use its own, distinct language for a significantly long period of time. In addition, with the exception of Russians, all ethnic groups in the Soviet Union had to prove that they had continued to use their own language since the very beginning of their existence as an ethnic group. Thus, the task was to find a historically-proven link between the area inhabited by the ethnic group and the language of the ethnic group. A successful combination of the notion of the continued use of language and the principle of the first-settlers in the territory in question was essential to ethnic leaderships for maintaining or upgrading their ethno-territorial status and, as we will see further on, became the main component of the textbook’s historical narratives dealing with the distant past of ethnic groups.

In this paper, we will attempt to show the conflicting character of ethno-centric narratives in school textbooks by examining the textbooks’ sample in three directions: firstly, we will compare historical narratives of the unified textbooks of the history of the USSR with the versions of history and the way history had been taught in the non-Russian Soviet regions; secondly, we will compare the versions of regional histories published locally in some autonomies during the Soviet period, and thirdly, we will examine the historical narratives in the contemporary post-Soviet textbooks.

ETHNIC ENCLOSURE

Before proceeding any further, a brief explanation of what is understood by ethnic enclosure is necessary. The use of the term “enclosure” in referring to the processes in the Soviet Union is intended to generate associations with the 18th-century enclosure in England, because the historic enclosure presented a case of simultaneous exclusion and inclusion. In the process of enclosure, peasants were excluded from owning land, but at the same time the land was fenced in and secured for farming and sheep grazing,

i.e. included. The process of ethnic enclosure can be also characterized by simultaneous exclusion and inclusion: there are non-titular ethnic groups, who are expelled from the area in question, i.e. excluded, and there is a titular ethnic group, which is included, i.e. remains the only one in the territory in question. In the Soviet Union, it was often the case when the attempts to combine the arguments of the continuous use of language and the first-settlers principle with respect to the territory in question resulted in the emergence of two rival versions of ethnogenesis reflecting the distant past of both ethnic groups. Each version gave the historical advantage to one ethnic group at the expense of the rival ethnic group and the latter was excluded from the area in question, i.e. the disputed territory became ethnically enclosed by only one ethnic group. Figure 1 shows these mutual enclosure attempts in a schematic way. It is necessary to emphasize here that we are talking first of all about *symbolic* inclusion and exclusion, although there are plenty of cases, when a symbolic enclosure was followed by a forced migration of people belonging to non-titular ethnic groups.

TEACHING HISTORY IN SCHOOLS OF SOVIET AUTONOMIES

One of the important aspects of ethnic enclosure attempted by rival ethnic groups in the Soviet Union was the way ethnic histories were taught in autonomies. For example, in contrast to the story with the textbooks of the history of USSR, when at any given time the students of any school in the Soviet Union used the only version of the textbook approved by the All-Union Ministry of Education and all the textbooks had to be replaced throughout the entire country as soon as a new edition was published (Wertch 2002, 80), the textbooks of regional histories had to be approved by republican or autonomous ministries of education, and the local authorities had a significant degree of freedom in choosing the content of the textbooks (Kuzin et al 1979). Often, these textbooks had been published in the titular or regional languages but a Russian-language edition was always printed simultaneously or soon after.

In parts dealing with the distant past of the territories in question, the narratives of the textbooks published in autonomies were centered on the combination of the “first-settlers” principle with the postulate of the continuous use of language. Since the historical justification was an important element of the symbolic ethnic enclosure, the

indigenous historians were strongly encouraged by their ethnic leadership to search in the distant past for evidences of the continuity of the use of their language in the territory in question.

The methodological recommendations for teaching republican histories in the Soviet Union called upon the teachers to use extensively extra-curriculum material and allowed a much greater flexibility of lessons' planning as well as the curricula design than in the case of teaching a unified all-Union history. The authors of the methodological recommendations for teaching regional (republican, local) histories advised teachers to avoid the duplication of the themes in the course of the all-Union and local histories, notably, when teaching ancient history. This, in practice, often meant the replacement of the themes in the course of the all-Union history by the topics concerned with the history of the distant past of the territory in question. As the author of one of the reports on these issues published during the Soviet times cautiously acknowledges, “[t]hemes related to regional history prevail” (Kuzin et al 1979, 8-9). Consequently, the local textbooks' representations of history of the distant past as concerned non-Russian ethnic groups were much less ideologically-driven than the descriptions of the more recent events. Instead, they were almost exclusively ethno-centrally based.

In addition, the Soviet methodology of teaching history facilitated an easy absorption of a simplified version of history by the students. Teachers in the Soviet Union were taught that if historical data is clearly presented and concretely discussed, even small children can understand the most complicated generalizations of the historical process: focusing students' attention on single, important facts or events and making generalizations about the character of certain happenings or developments are some of the common techniques which Soviet history teachers were encouraged to use in the classrooms (Medlin 1960, 107).

Thus far, we have discussed two issues as a necessary background for the examination of history textbooks: firstly, the concept of ethnic enclosure and, secondly, the way regional histories were taught in the Soviet Union. Next, let us proceed with an

overview of the content of some of the Soviet textbooks of regional history, in particular, of the textbooks published in the Caucasus⁴.

ETHNIC ENCLOSURE IN SOVIET SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS

Since the ethnic group's status in the Soviet system of ethno-territorial division was considered of essential importance for the well-being of an ethnic group, the narratives of many history and geography textbooks published locally described in detail the changes of the status of the ethnic group in question. Indicatively, the only significant difference between 1971 and 1973 editions of the textbook published in Checheno-Ingushetia was that the 1973 edition of the textbook dedicated the entire paragraph to a detailed description of the changes of the status while the previous book did not spread much detail on this issue (*Geografia checheno-ingushskoi assr*: 1973, 3-4).

However, the policy of ethnic enclosure was most clearly reflected in indigenous authors' description of the distant past of their respective ethnic groups. Let us take a brief look at Georgian and Abkhazian textbooks. One of the Soviet textbooks of history of Georgia (*Istoriya gruzii* 1973) starts with the chapter entitled "Georgian tribes and their neighbors" and the scene is set at the distance of three thousand years in the past. The authors acknowledge the linguistic differences of the ancestors of modern inhabitants of Georgia but link linguistically the majority of ancient population to the modern Georgian language and to the common 'root' of a 'cohesive' Georgian nation. The mentioning of Abkhazians in this part of the textbook is made in relation to the description of a group of tribes, the majority of which inhabited neighboring territories and not Georgia proper, i.e. Abkhazians presented as late-comers in the territory in question (Ibid, 9). When authors describe the extent of the political influence of the Kartli Kingdom to the Western Georgia (i.e. to Abkhazia), they also explain to students that the growth of the influence of the Kartli Kingdom resulted in the 'cultural-ethnic' unification of the population of Georgia, and this process took part not only in the area of spiritual and material culture but with respect to the language as well (Ibid, 27).

⁴ For a detailed examination of the content of the textbooks published in the South Caucasus, see, e.g., Rouvinski 2006.

In contrast to the version of the distant past of Abkhazia advocated by Georgian historians, the Abkhazian authors managed to combine very old local elements of the legendary Colchis Kingdom with the cultural heritage of tribes originated in Asia Minor in order to explain to Abkhazian students the ethnogenesis of the Abkhazian ethnic group and expand the area under the Abkhazian influence in the distant past. Abkhazians argued that the tribes from Asia Minor mixed with local inhabitants in the territory of modern Abkhazia and transmitted them their higher culture and language. All this, according to the textbook's narrative, took place as early as in the 2nd millennium BC (*Ocherki istorii abkhazskoi assr* 1960, 12-19 and 34-35). Thus, the book successfully enclosed the territory disputed with Georgians, symbolically forcing out any Kartvelian-related group and leaving the distant past exclusively to the Abkhazian ancestors.

It is important to note that the Soviet settings for the ethno-territorial competition described earlier in this paper resulted in an enormous production of ethnocentric literature, which reflected the struggle between ethnic leadership of Soviet autonomies for the maintenance or upgrading of the status of their autonomies in the administrative-territorial structure of the Soviet Union. Moreover, when the political environment *en situ* changed, the textbooks had to be rewritten in order to correspond to a new official version of history of one or another ethnic group. Hence, the attempts at enclosure had been mutual, and textbooks of regional history often provided the students of rival ethnic groups with conflicting versions of the distant past of the territory in question. The Soviet disunion freed hands of the authors of textbooks in former Soviet autonomies, some of which became independent (although not always internationally recognized) states. From then on, the narratives of many textbooks started to mirror the 'extreme' versions of ethnogenesis habitually denying the presence of any other ethnic groups in the distant past of often still disputed territories. Yet, they continue to rely on the combination of the postulate of the continuous use of language and the first-settlers principle as a core of their plots. Below we will review several post-Soviet history textbooks in order to show that the legacy of the Soviet policy of ethnic enclosure remains vivid.

ETHNIC ENCLOSURE IN POST-SOVIET TEXTBOOKS

In today's Georgian history and geography school textbooks, language continues to be extensively employed to link Georgian ethnic group to the past of the disputed territories. For example, the authors of the Russian-language edition of the geography textbook (*Geografia gruzii* 1998) in addition to the provision of the geographical names in the Georgian language throughout the textbook, provides students with a map, which indicates the spread of the languages in the Caucasus⁵. Not surprisingly, the Abkhazian language is listed in the same group as the Georgian language⁶ (Ibid, 5). The other textbook, starting with the argument of the linguistic similarities between the language of the Urartu people and the modern Georgian language (*Istoriya gruzii dlya 8 klassa* 1998, 22-23), emphasizes the use of 'Kartli (Georgian) language as lingua franca in the Western Georgia (i.e. the territory, which, in the Georgian interpretation, includes Abkhazia) as early as in 4-3 centuries BC (Ibid, 26).

The authors of the history textbook published in Abkhazia (*Istoriya abkhazii* 1991) tell the students that there are only few sources, which can shed the light on the issue of the Abkhazian ethnogenesis but here '[the Abkhaz] language comes to a rescue' (Ibid, 5). The statement that 'as it is widely acknowledged, the Abkhaz language is one of the oldest languages in the world' (Ibid: 6) and that is truly autochthonous to the geographical space occupied by Abkhazians today, is supported by extensive explanations in the area of historical linguistics, including the examination of the Abkhazian topography and vocabulary. However, the key idea of the chapter can be easily found in the following sentence: '... in the modern Caucasus, there are two autochthonous families of languages: the North-Caucasian and the Kartvelian, *but [historically] they are not related to each other* [emphasis added].' (Ibid, 7). This rejects any linguistically-based claim of Abkhazia being a Georgian territory.

In the Russian Federation today, with no ethno-territorial division *de jure*, many administrative regions inherited their ethnic composition from the Soviet period,

⁵ The map is placed even before political and physical maps of Georgia!

⁶ Although Abkhaz belongs to the North Caucasian family of languages while Georgian is part of the South Caucasian family of languages (Grenoble 2003, 217).

when they acquired their autonomous status as a result of the successful implementation of the policy of ethnic enclosure. Moreover, although there is a choice of textbooks for teaching federal component of the three-component design of school history curricula in Russia⁷, it is safe to say that the narratives of the most of modern all-Russian history textbooks are centered on the “Russian history of Russia”. As one of senior scholars at the Russian Academy of Education noted, “if to compare all-Russian history textbooks with a mirror, then many of [ethnic groups] of Russia cannot see their reflection” (Batsyn 2005, 62). Thus, history teachers in ethnically non-Russian territories are using the regional component in order to teach ethnic histories to their students, and the textbooks of non-Russian regional histories are often centered on ethnic histories of one particular ethnic group = former “titular nationality” of the former autonomous region. Apparently, in some of the textbooks there are clear evidences of the attempts at a symbolic ethnic enclosure of the territory in questions.

One of the examples of attempts at a symbolic ethnic enclosure can be found in textbooks used for teaching regional history in the Adygheya Republic (*Rasskazy po istorii adygeii* 2002, *Istoriya adygeii s drevneishikh vremen...* 2002). Their authors appeal to students to be proud of the fact that there are many historical evidences of the existence of a greater Adygheya in the distant past. Describing the “historical evidences”, the authors place a particular emphasis on the spread and the continuity of the use of the Adyghe language and significantly expand the Adygheya’s borders in the past by including the part of the territory of today’s Krasnodar region and neighboring Caucasian territories. This is how the vast area becomes symbolically enclosed by Adygheians.

Another example is the textbook published in the Komi Republic (*Istoriya respubliki komi* 2000). Illustratively, the textbook starts with explanations of the importance of language for knowing the ethnic identity of people who inhabited one or another territory in the distant past (Ibid., 14). These explanations are followed by a map showing the spread of the Uralic languages on a vast territory of the Northern

⁷ Federal, regional, and local (see more on the school history curricula design in the Russian Federation in Batsyn 2005, 59-64)

Europe and to the east from the Urals.⁸ Although the textbook's narrative acknowledges the presence of other ethnic groups in the "recent" history of the region, the authors claim that "only for Komi people, this Northern land is the homeland from times immemorial" (Ibid., 6-7). Hence, the territory becomes symbolically enclosed by Komi.

CONCLUSION

It is possible to find a number of other examples of recent attempts at a symbolic ethnic enclosure, notably, in the textbooks published in the North Caucasus, Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, but a detailed examination of the content of these textbooks is a task for future research. For now, however, it is suffice to say that the legacy of ethnic enclosure as concerns the way the distant past is presented in school textbooks of ethnic histories is obviously remains very vivid in former Soviet ethnic autonomies. The disappearance of the Soviet political settings and dogmas has yet to result in the change of the approach chosen by the authors of many textbooks. The conclusion is, therefore, three-fold.

Firstly, the examination of both Soviet and post-Soviet textbooks shows that the knowledge of the distant past is extensively used to construct the contemporary ethnic identities. In all of the textbooks examined in this paper, the links between the 'titular' ethnic group and the territory in question have been created by combining the argument of the continuous use of language and the first-settlers principle, and a significant part of the overwhelming majority of history textbooks' narratives is devoted to the discussion of linguistic arguments with respect to the issue of the group's homeland. Secondly, in many cases, the references have been made to the same historical events or linguistic findings; the only difference is the interpretation. Thirdly, the examination of the representation of the distant past in the Soviet and post-Soviet school textbooks confirms the appropriateness of the chosen theoretical approach to view the drawing of ethnic boundaries in the Soviet Union as a process of inclusion and exclusion, i.e. as an 'ethnic enclosure'. The remaining legacy of the policy of ethnic

⁸ Uralic form a language family of about 30 languages spoken today by approximately 20 million people in Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Norway, Romania, Russia, the Serbian province of Vojvodina and Sweden. There are controversial debates over genetic relationships of Uralic languages with Altaic languages (Grenoble 2003, 13-15).

enclosure as reflected in the school textbooks should be regarded as a warning sign for educational authorities since attempts to ethnically enclose one or another territory may contribute to the growth of hostilities between ethnic groups.

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Figure 1. Mutual Ethnic Enclosures

