



Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union (Culture and Society after Socialism)

By Francine Hirsch

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When the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, they set themselves the task of building socialism in the vast landscape of the former Russian Empire, a territory populated by hundreds of different peoples belonging to a multitude of linguistic, religious, and ethnic groups. Before 1917, the Bolsheviks had called for the national self-determination of all peoples and had condemned all forms of colonization as exploitative. After attaining power, however, they began to express concern that it would not be possible for Soviet Russia to survive without the cotton of Turkestan and the oil of the Caucasus. In an effort to reconcile their anti-imperialist position with their desire to hold on to as much territory as possible, the Bolsheviks integrated the national idea into the administrative-territorial structure of the new Soviet state.

In *Empire of Nations*, Francine Hirsch examines the ways in which former imperial ethnographers and local elites provided the Bolsheviks with ethnographic knowledge that shaped the very formation of the new Soviet Union. The ethnographers—who drew inspiration from the Western European colonial context—produced all-union censuses, assisted government commissions charged with delimiting the USSR's internal borders, led expeditions to study "the human being as a productive force," and created ethnographic exhibits about the "Peoples of the USSR." In the 1930s, they would lead the Soviet campaign against Nazi race theories. Hirsch illuminates the pervasive tension between the colonial-economic and ethnographic definitions of Soviet territory; this tension informed Soviet social, economic, and administrative structures. A major contribution to the history of Russia and the Soviet Union, *Empire of Nations* also offers new insights into the connection between ethnography and empire.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Referring to the Soviet Union as an 'empire of nations,' Hirsch demonstrates through prodigious research how ethnographers from the former tsarist regime collaborated with the Leninists to shape the new state. Hers is the tale of a modernizing, self-styled scientific state that imposed categories, names, and programs on ethnic populations with relatively little say in their own fate. . . . *Empire of Nations* is an exceptionally rich book and a significant addition to the growing literature on the construction of the Soviet state. Beautifully written and clearly presented even when the story hovers on complicated administrative matters, Hirsch's account of the Soviet Union as a 'work in progress' that neither began with a blueprint nor achieved completion reaffirms the now widely accepted view of nation-formation as a process of human intervention and invention."? Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Moscow Times*, 2 September 2005

"Hirsch does not simply . . . posit another ideological or epistemological model of Soviet history. She instead provides a completely new kind of analysis. Her book is more than an innovative study of high quality; it stakes out a position that cannot fail to have a long-standing impact on the historiography of the Soviet state."? Marina Mogil'ner, *Ab Imperio*, March 2005

"This innovative and important book reinterprets the formation of the Soviet Union in the years after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Instead of focusing on the views of the Soviet leadership and the events surrounding the official formation of the Soviet Union in 1922, Hirsch takes a broader perspective on the processes involved with establishing a nationalities policy in the Soviet Union from the prerevolutionary background through the 1930s by looking at the activities of experts and local elites, among others. Highly recommended."? *Choice*, April 2006

"Turning the tsarist empire into the Soviet Union involved equal parts brutality and ingenuity. Francine Hirsch exposes both in this insightful and provocative study of Soviet nation-building. *Empire of Nations* is the sharpest and most careful tour yet of the ethnographic workshop that was at the heart of the Soviet experiment."? Willard Sunderland, author of *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe*

"Francine Hirsch approaches the formation of the Soviet Union as a process that begins rather than ends when the USSR was created in 1922. Concentrating on the role of ethnographers over the next twenty years, she places these social scientists in the context both of wider European developments and particular local

struggles, providing an account that is both comprehensive and rooted in specific experiences. The result is a sophisticated view of the unexpectedly important role played by anthropologists and ethnographers, who through a complicated collaboration with state officials both shaped the forms and categories of Soviet citizenship and simultaneously came under tremendous pressure to bring their own discipline into line."—Douglas Northrop, author of *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia*

From the Inside Flap

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About the Author

Francine Hirsch is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

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