

# Soviet Bureaucracy as a Category Coining Machine: Ethnicity, Ethnography, and the “Primordial Trap”

Simon Schlegel\*

***Abstract:** Soviet use of ethnicity as an administrative category significantly changed the way ethnic groups and the boundaries between them came to be conceived. The ascription of ethnic identities through the Soviet passport system is very well studied. It is less clear, however, how this practice was justified when faced with contradiction and how the theoretical concepts behind it became common and lasting beliefs. In a long-term assessment of the consequences of Soviet administrative practices, this study combines archival research and biographical interviews to uncover the deep imprints Soviet ethnicity policies left on contemporary forms of categorization. Research was conducted in southern Bessarabia, a multi-ethnic and peripheral region of south-western Ukraine. Through this local lens, the study takes a close look at how Soviet social sciences dealt with contradictions that occurred between its clear-cut categories and a fuzzier social reality. The paper shows that the main strategy to overcome such ambiguity has been to coin new social categories whenever the established ones failed to accommodate all observable cases. I argue that this solution leads into a “primordial trap,” the claim that all these newly coined categories had existed long before anyone realized. Soviet institutions combined three practices that led ethnicity to be taken as a natural and decisive part of everyone’s identity: Soviet social sciences declared ethnicity an essential category; the Soviet education apparatus made ethnicity a pervasive reality; and Soviet*

---

\* The author wishes to thank the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle (Saale), Germany, for its generous funding of the research on which this paper is based.

*administration ascribed one ethnic label to each of its citizens. Re-tracing these three practices, the article examines the underlying scholarly theories and the resulting folk theories which tend to lead into the “primordial trap.” The state that created today’s dominant ethnicity concepts may have long vanished, but the inbuilt evasive maneuver of creating ever new categories on the blurred boundaries of obsolete ones made its ethnicity concepts remarkably resilient.*

This study examines how the Soviet usage of ethnicity as an administrative category shaped the way ethnicity is used by state actors and among the wider public of post-soviet Ukraine. The argument focuses on three main practices; the coining of ethnic categories by administrators and scholars, the dissemination of these categories through the state’s educational and cultural institutions, and the ascription of these categories to individual citizens. The study is based on fieldwork between September 2012 and December 2013 in a peripheral and ethnically very diverse region of south-western Ukraine, a region most commonly referred to as southern Bessarabia. Today, this region is largely Russian speaking.<sup>1</sup> In the main town, Izmail, Russians and Ukrainians together amount to roughly 80 per cent of the population. Many of the villages in the town’s vicinity are inhabited predominantly by Bulgarians, Moldovans, or the Turkic speaking Gagauz. The Gagauz, like their neighbors, are mainly Orthodox Christians. Together with Bulgarians and a much smaller group of Albanians, they came to this Region as agricultural settlers from the territory of modern-day Bulgaria, mainly around the year of 1812, when the Ottoman Empire had to cede Bessarabia to Russia (Kushko and Taki 2012: 164). Based on an approach that blends methods from history and anthropology, this article looks for

---

<sup>1</sup> This means that in public situations, most people would start a conversation with a stranger in Russian. The latest all-Ukrainian census from 2001 indicates for Odessa oblast’ a slight majority of people who call Ukrainian their native language (46.3%) over Russian (41.9%) ([http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/regions/reg\\_odes/](http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/regions/reg_odes/)), but also a slight majority of people who say Russian is the language they are most fluent in ([http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/results/nationality\\_population/graphic#m4](http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/results/nationality_population/graphic#m4)). Unless indicated otherwise, all URLs provided in this article were last accessed on 30 September 2018.