

# Goff, Krista A. 2020. *Nested Nationalism: Making and Unmaking Nations in the Soviet Caucasus*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

## Book Review

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First, the Nagorno-Karabakh war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2020, then Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022 and ethnic flare-ups in many other post-Soviet regions have once again brought up the legacies of the Soviet nationalities policy in the context of colonialism-decolonialism, nationalism-internationalism, etc. However, is there anything left unsaid about the Soviets' nationalities policy? Krista A. Goff's book *Nested Nationalism: Making and Unmaking Nations in the Soviet Caucasus* not only demonstrates the pertinence of this question, but furthermore reminds us that there are still many issues that need to be explored in order to properly understand Soviet politics regarding nations and to examine its impacts today. That is to say, in her book, Goff brings to the fore some very important issues that have been largely ignored until now and opens up new perspectives for us to ask new questions.

*Nested Nationalism* looks at the issue of nationalities in the Soviet Union—not at the relations between Russia and the other 14 republics, but rather the relations between the majority and minorities within the republics—particularly in Azerbaijan. As Goff herself mentioned, central to the book are inquiries into the actual encounters of both “titular” and “non-titular” groups within the Soviet Union and the ways in which these encounters led to diverse reactions that continue to impact the area in the present, as well as the influence of government-generated documentation in concealing certain aspects that have significantly influenced the narratives surrounding Soviet republics and their subsequent trajectories (2). This approach opens up a very crucial perspective that is overlooked in mainstream studies—how was nationalization and nation-building within these republics received by other minorities or non-titular nations within them? As important as this question is, it is a more difficult process to explore. Because, as Goff said,

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this was not a well-documented issue and many of the archives have been destroyed. Therefore, Goff conducts her research in a hybrid format—both through accessible archives and oral interviews. “Many non-titular minority communities were not bureaucratically recognized after the 1930s, making them much harder to trace in Soviet archives. There are also significant gaps in history writing and ethnographies of nontitular minorities because of repressive state practices” (6).

The first parts of the book are mainly based on archival materials from 5 different former Soviet republics (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and the Russian Federation), and the later parts were written based on more than 120 oral history interviews which were completed in 13 years (2007–2020) in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, and the Netherlands (with people from Azerbaijan). In other words, first we read the political-social frameworks and discussions of nation-building in the Soviets, mainly in Azerbaijan, in the 1930s, the period of World War II, and the period after Stalin’s death; however, in the last two parts, we witness the experiences of the non-titular nations more directly via oral interviews. But still, when writing about the history of nation-building in the Soviets in the first parts, oral interviews and insights of Goff according to these are sometimes referred to, or on the contrary, some historical events are sometimes recalled later through the archives.

Another main feature of the methodology in the book is the periods it covers. Goff focuses on the “cultural revolution” in the Stalin period of the late 1920s, early 1930s, and late 1930s; the post-war period following World War II; the period of de-Stalinization (Khrushchev’s Thaw); and ends with the last period of Soviet rule. This periodization seems very logical since these are the main periods about which the “non-titular lens offers new ways of thinking.” As Goff stated, “multiple scholars have argued, for example, that the drive for centralization during the cultural revolution of the late 1920s and early 1930s impaired *korenizatsiia* in national republics. The period looks quite different however, when the nontitular perspective is taken into account because it was only at this time that many nontitular minorities were first brought into *korenizatsiia* and started to experience well-known aspects of Soviet nationhood” (22). Likewise “Shifting the perspective from titular to nontitular nationalities similarly decenters debates about Russifying policies in the 1930s. When nontitular minorities were expunged from the census in 1939 they often were folded into the titular nationality of the republic in which they lived” (23).

As I emphasized earlier, one of the issues that makes the book extremely important at the moment is that Goff opens up the issue of the Soviets and

colonialism in new perspectives, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, and provides important information and frameworks. According to Goff, in numerous countries that emerged after the Soviet era, the Soviet encounter has been interpreted through a framework that emphasizes how Moscow and the Russian populace, acting as representatives of Soviet authority in the outer regions, marginalized and discriminated against non-Russian ethnic groups and autonomous territories. This portrayal suggests that all non-Russian groups were equally innocent victims, uniformly excluded from the prevailing power establishments in their surroundings. However, this depiction is far from accurate. While the Soviet system did genuinely promote national equality in certain aspects, it also fostered structures that perpetuated inequality. So, the center-periphery perspective, therefore, occasionally obscures the intricate power dynamics within the Soviet republics. For numerous non-dominant ethnic groups, it is the promotion of their own ethnic identity—rather than Russian or Soviet colonization—that is responsible for the foundational disparities that have persisted across generations (5). Goff reinforces this perspective, particularly in Chapter 5, by clarifying minority activism with oral interviews. For instance, she quotes petitions and interviews where Georgian-Ingiloy frequently expressed their appreciation to Moscow for supporting them, while attributing their difficulties to the actions of the republic and local authorities.

Therefore, minority activism, which is detailed in Chapter 5, is the most important part of the book, and especially ignored in previous studies. Goff not only shows the roots of the minority problems in the Soviet era, which many scholars have dealt with since the end of the 1980s or the post-Soviet period, but also examines how different minorities react to those problems and how they show common and different characteristics with each other. We also learn the different reactions of the state to these different forms of activism. For example, why did the government treat the complaints of Georgian-Ingiloy and Lezgins more cautiously, but a different attitude was shown to the complaints of Talysh and Kurds? According to Goff, the reason for this could be explained by the relations between the republics, which she calls “kinship network”, and Soviet international relations. That is, the location of the Talysh and Kurds on the border and the presence of their ethnic compatriots in countries such as Iran and Turkey; the relationship of the Ingiloy with another titular nation, the Georgians, and their protection by Georgia; and the defence of the Lezgins by their compatriots in Dagestan within the Soviets brought out such differences. “Kinship networks are at the heart of this story. A range of political actors in Communist Party structures, national movements, and minority communities sought to extend their

cultural spheres of influence and make contingent use of kin minorities to advance national claims to neighboring republics and international states” (7).

But in general, we can learn how the kinship network and Soviet foreign policy determined the complex relations between the center, republican elites and non-titular nations in the transformation of the system of nationalities experienced by the Soviets during the World War II, discussed in Chapter 2. Particularly during the aftermath of the war, the Soviet leadership pushed the limits of its influence by encouraging nationalist movements among Kurds and Azeris in Iran, as well as asserting territorial demands against Turkey. In response, Georgia and Armenia also pursued actions to enhance their sway in the region. They simultaneously countered the benefits that Azerbaijan could achieve, and these actions were interconnected and explained in relation to one another. As Goff stated, “Soviet occupation of northern Iran and claims to Turkish territory legitimized discourses of national extraterritoriality that Azeri, Armenian, Georgian, Kurdish, and other national advocates eagerly engaged and sometimes used against one another” (64). In this way, all nation building and nationalism projects in the region were touched.

Continuing from this, Chapter 3 delves into the impacts of the historical legacy spanning from the post-war to the post-Stalin periods on the political dynamics of nations. Goff further highlights a significant aspect—the role of ethnogenesis in historical narratives within Soviet nationalities policy, using illustrative instances. To elaborate, during the post-Stalin era, regional leaderships, as they pursued their agendas of national identity, substantiated their actions through the scholarly construction of ethnogenesis. “In this way, the field of ethnogenesis helped to naturalize the institutionalized power of titular nations over non-titular peoples in the USSR” (110). An instance of this can be observed with Azerbaijan, which, despite not categorizing the Talysh people as a distinct minority in the 1959 population census, defended this stance by referencing the “findings” and claims of scholars. Hence, the nationalist assertions, initially unwelcome in the political sphere, found completion through a reliance on “scientific support.”

Ultimately, “nested nationalism” emerges as an exceptionally illuminating piece of research, marked by meticulousness and strong substantiation. Its significance is paramount for those intrigued by Soviet history, the intricate process of nation-building, and the complexities of minority politics. Furthermore, it offers crucial insights for those interested in the ongoing transformations unfolding in today’s post-Soviet geographical landscape.