

Professor examines processes in Soviet Union's formation

July 14 2005

Fall 1991 found Francine Hirsch entering the Ph.D. program in history at Princeton, just as unprecedented change was unfolding in the former Soviet Union. It certainly was an exciting time to be a graduate student. Watching the Soviet Union dissolve, Hirsch elected to study the processes surrounding its formation some 70 years earlier.

"I was stunned to see the rapid and dramatic emergence of new national movements, violent national conflicts - in Nagorno-Karabakh, for example - and new nation states such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan," says Hirsch, now an assistant professor of history at the UW-Madison. Hirsch's book, "Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union," was released this year (Cornell University Press).

Watching the Soviet Union dissolve, Hirsch elected to study the processes surrounding its formation some 70 years earlier. She discovered that once in power, the Bolsheviks knew next to nothing about the land and peoples they were trying to govern.

"The Bolsheviks relied greatly on expert ethnographers, local elites and other experts from the former Russian empire for information about the various groups and regions within their borders. That information was instrumental in shaping how the Soviet regime saw its population," she says. "Many of these experts and elites were enamored with the 'national idea.' They helped to foster the creation of new nations in regions where clans and tribal identities predominated."

The impact of the broader international context particularly interested Hirsch, she says. She reports that she was amazed at the extent to which the experts and local elites assisting the Bolsheviks appropriated key ideas from European states and colonial empires.

"The European 'Age of Empire' and the First World War, with its popularization of the national idea, supplied the critical backdrop for the early years of Soviet state formation," she says.

During the course of a decade, Hirsch conducted research in archives and libraries in both Russia and the United States.

"I really wanted to find materials that shed light on how 'ordinary people' were affected by and responded to Soviet nationality policy. Some of my most interesting finds were petitions or letters from individuals or entire communities to Soviet leaders, asking for things such as national language schools or a resolution to disputed territory. I also found 'comment books' in which people from all regions of the Soviet Union recorded their impressions of the exhibits in the State Ethnographic Museum during the 1920s and '30s," she says.

Often, Hirsch was the first person to read documents classified "strictly secret" for 60 or 70 years.

"This definitely added to the thrill of research; some days I would find documents that were so interesting that I could barely contain my excitement," she says.

Her trips to Russia yielded friendships with a cross section of archivists, historians and teachers. She says that she heard many stories about World War II and the early post-war years from her friends' parents and grandparents.

"Most of them had mixed feelings about the dramatic changes taking place in their society," she says. "There is still nostalgia for the USSR; some Russians continue to remember it as a multinational state in which diverse people lived harmoniously in a 'friendship of peoples.'"

Hirsch quickly adds that Soviet nationality policy was, by and large, incredibly brutal and repressive.

"The Soviets took nation-building very seriously. They poured enormous resources into creating official nationalities, with official national cultures, languages, histories and institutions. In the process, they also stamped out local traditions, cultures and practices, and even committed mass murder," she says.

Nonetheless, Hirsch says there might be some lessons for American policy makers to glean from the Soviet experience.

"The Soviet attempt to transform Central Asia, for example, shows what can happen when an outside power comes into a region and tries to change the accepted order of things, creating new 'winners' and 'losers,'" she says. "Soviet-sponsored nation-building took on a life of its own as local communities tried to work the new situation to their advantage, and significant violence between communities erupted. There are still border disputes today in some of the same regions contested in the 1920s and '30s.

"The Soviets proved unable to control nation-building in Central Asia and other parts of the USSR, in spite of their best efforts to do so," she adds.

Source: University of Wisconsin

Citation: Professor examines processes in Soviet Union's formation (2005, July 14) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2005-07-professor-soviet-union-formation.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.