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**Constructing National Identity Among Ethnic Minorities in the  
Russian Federation - A Bourdieuean Perspective On Biographical  
Accounts of Armenians in Saint Petersburg**

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## Abstract

The perestroika-reforms have not only led to major changes in the political and economic system of the Soviet Union and its successor states but they have had a considerable impact on the life world of former Soviet citizens. While it is commonly recognized that the socio-economic changes of the last few years went hand in hand with new national identities the ethnic phenomenon is characterized by a great deal of variability. The main questions that will be posed in this paper are: What are ethnicity and nationalism in the Russian Federation, and What did the ethnic revival in the last few years look like from a perspective from below? To open this problem to empirical investigation I have decided to adopt a biographical approach. Based on 24 biographical interviews with Armenians in Petersburg produced between 1994 and 1996, this paper explores the implications of the system level changes for the life world of the subjects. Using Bourdieu's habitus concept I will try to reconstruct the ethnic viewpoint of two selected ethnic activists to help explain the formation of ethnic minorities in Russia, like the role of the family's history, the realization of one's professional plans and the ethnic interpretation of everyday life. I will argue that ethnic networks had been built long before the perestroika reforms took place. This process was significantly accelerated during the demise of the Soviet Union. The formation of groups according to ethnic lines had been in accordance with the prevailing ideology in the Soviet Union with its emphasis on cultural plurality ('Leninist national policy', cf. Soviet ethnos theory). Also, the modernizing influence of the institutions of higher education and the state was crucial to the emergence of national consciousness. Today, ethnic communities are increasingly taking over functions previously fulfilled by the state. Even social and political activists who are rather indifferent to national matters are forced to turn to their ethnic community to obtain the support and resources necessary to deal with the present socioeconomic situation. In short, individuals need no longer have significant ethnic attitudes to act 'ethnically'; the renaissance of ethnic communities is mainly a functional response to the demise of the state.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the successor states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is commonly subsumed under the broader concept of the “transformation” of Eastern Europe. The transformation process denotes a high degree of social change and evolution toward a new stage of Russia’s political, socioeconomic, and cultural development. However, it would be rash to assume that this transformation process is in any way a coherent development directed toward a specific end point. The process is not finished yet, and many outcomes seem possible.

There is not only a great deal of uncertainty concerning the future course of events, but the constant flux of societal development has revealed conceptual weaknesses in our familiar interpretative points of reference for understanding the social changes in Eastern Europe. The question of understanding what is going on is certainly not only a problem for Western observers but also for those who have directly been concerned by the ongoing social changes in the former Soviet Union. In particular, the renaissance of nationalism in the Russian Federation - typically considered an important aspect of the transformation process - seems to be too ambiguous and contradictory a phenomenon to be describable in simple terms (cf. the early study by Karklins 1986).

While summing up qualitative research in a short paper is difficult,<sup>2</sup> I hope that I can reach a compromise between a sufficiently complex and an understandable presentation. I hope this paper contributes to a ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973) of what ethnicity and nationalism means for those involved in the CIS. I will try to give an account starting from the perspective of the individuals concerned to reconstruct the construction of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1996). The biographical approach I have chosen implies that in order to understand nationalism today we have to look back to the individuals’ past. According to Alheit and Dausien (1985: 46) one’s biography represents a “complex mutual relation of individual and society”. Biographical accounts reflect the individual’s interpretive need to come to grips with ‘objective’ constraints. Therefore, the biographical approach is neither wholly ‘subjective’ nor ‘objective’; it refers to a complex tension between the individual and society.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at the Graduate Student Conference On Nationalism and Identity, April 26th and 27th, 1997, Duke University. While this paper is based on a Geertzian hermeneutic approach, I have also used this ethnographic material in a complementary paper that focuses more on methodological questions and textualist analysis. In “Narrative Analyse und gesellschaftlicher Wandel in der structural-marxistischen Diskursanalyse“ (Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Soziologie Magdeburg, 3) I explore the methodological avenues of structuralism, formal logic, and Fredric Jameson’s Marxist hermeneutics.

<sup>2</sup> The role of national consciousness during the transformation process has aroused my interest for a couple of years and led to five months of research in Saint Petersburg in 1996. The decision to do research on the Armenian community had little to do with the Armenians as such. In the first place, the Armenian community in Petersburg was to serve as a manageable example to come to grips with the problem of nationalism among ethnic minorities in the Russian Federation. Thanks to the help of the *Institute for Independent Social Research* (director: Viktor Voronkov) and the financial support of the Tempus/Tacis program of the European Union I analyzed roughly 20 biographical interviews of Armenians in Petersburg (produced with the generous support of Volkswagen foundation) and collected a few narrative interviews myself from members of Petersburg’s Armenian community. This resulted in 24 transcribed qualitative interviews taken between 1994 and 1996, which amounts to more than 450 closely printed pages (for a detailed analysis of this material see Angermüller 1997).

Pierre Bourdieu offers an interesting theory that helps explain how the changes in former Soviet societies are related to one's 'habitus.' According to Bourdieu, the habitus is a stable set of socially acquired dispositions which both allows to perceive socially meaningful differences and that generates action. Over time, the adaptation to one's social environment (socialization) and in particular early childhood experiences give rise to a stable set of action generating patterns which, in turn, is subject to historical changes (Bourdieu 1979: 189ff.). It is important to note that Bourdieu is primarily interested in questions of social inequality and has little to say about ethnicity. As Hall notes: "Fragmentary comments indicate that he [Bourdieu] thinks that ethnicity can be reduced to class" (1992: 269). However, Bourdieu's point is to understand the differential character of one's developing identity: "social identity defines and asserts itself in difference." The ethnic viewpoint, though not necessarily reducible to a class phenomenon, is a "system of differences" (Bourdieu 1979: 191) and thus can be incorporated as a habitus.

With respect to ethnicity, Bourdieu's constructivist approach is geared to revealing the major events, forces, and experiences of somebody's past which contributed to the formation of perceptive dispositions and attitudes that may make things, events, and identities appear ethnic. Also, especially in times of rapid social change Bourdieu's habitus concept helps me explain why people reacted in this or that way to a changing situation. Looking back and reconstructing the forces that led to the formation of a certain habitus facilitates our understanding of present behavior. This perspective avoids a homogenizing view of the ethnic group. In fact, it is almost marked by battles for recognition and exists only to the extent that other groups define it. The ethnic habitus as well as the ethnic group is a structuring structured (*structurant structur e*), a fluctuating whole defined by its differences both within and vis- -vis its borders.

What we call an ethnic group is in fact a group of people that is marked by certain commonalities of their habitus. The individuals of an ethnic community are unified by certain features of their habitus which makes them perceive their social reality in a similar way when it comes to the definition of the other. This perception is a disposition acquired over time and rather automatic and unconscious when executed in a special situation. Especially at a time when institutionalized patterns of ordering and imposing meaning are vanishing or profoundly changing individuals are forced to interrogate their incorporated stocks of knowledge to come up with meaningful interpretations. The acquired schemes of making sense of the world are constructed in a long enduring process and incorporated to a degree that their application is in many cases a spontaneous corporeal reaction. That's why, it seems, in some cases ethnicity is understood as a biological fact or a genetical fact, controlling and determining one's existence rather than as an ephemeral construct (see below the case of Armen Rodian).

In the following sections I will discuss the role of the habitus for the formation of ethnic consciousness in St. Petersburg (cf. Voronkov 1996, Sikevich et al. 1995) by contrasting the account of Armen Rodian (who I'll call the 'patriot') with the account of the largely non-nationally oriented Leon Pomogeli (the 'value-committed cosmopolitan'). The two cases are typical examples of how different forms of ethnic consciousness are related to

the formation of two different habituses. I will concentrate on these two cases because of their idealtypical antagonism concerning the role of the ethnic (minimal-maximal selection). After an analysis of Armen's and Leon's accounts I will try to come up with some more general statements concerning the social background of nationalism in present-day Russia. In particular, I want to question the conceptual unity implied by the terms 'ethnicity' and 'transformation process'. For this reason it is necessary to have an understanding of the sociohistorical background and the contradictory nature of the phenomena that lie behind these terms.

### **Armen Rodian - The patriot**

Armen Rodian was born in 1948 in Kirovakan, Armenia. Coming from a family in which national (Armenian) consciousness played a significant role, he soon tried to become a painter. However, his efforts to apply to Yerevan's College of Art failed because of his poor grades in high school. On the advice of one of his father's acquaintances, however, Armen came to Leningrad in 1966 to enter the city's art academy. Once again, these plans were thwarted, and Armen had to found a studio of his own. After marrying a Greek woman in 1974, he began to work for the local community of the Armenian church and spend money to organize Petersburg's Armenians.

Armen highly valued his social activities in Leningrad's Armenian community. The interaction with his compatriots helped him both understand himself as a national being and stabilize his professional self-esteem, which at times brought him in conflict with Soviet state authorities. Since he was actively involved in organizing a network of liberal and nationally conscious Armenians in Leningrad, the secret police (GPU, KGB) put him under observation. When the restrictions to the articulation of one's political opinion were removed in the late 80s, the scope of religious and political activity enormously increased. In 1988 Armen and his collaborators reestablished the Armenian Church in Leningrad and began to extend the sphere of their influence beyond the limits of quasi conspiratorial networks. While the Armenian community in Leningrad had to cope with the influx of Armenian war refugees who had migrated into Mountainous Karabagh and by the earthquake in Armenia of 1988, Armen's personal economic situation remained rather stable. Unlike many other citizens of the Russian Federation he is able to sell his paintings directly on the market and does not depend on low unreliable state salaries.

What are the particularities of Armen's habitus considering that he came from a rather traditional and nationally conscious family and that his professional career did not work out as he intended? In the following I will give a more precise account of Armen's of the features of Armen's habitus and the consequences for his national orientation.

1) **Biographical 'passivism'**. Armen's biography is characterized by a tension between his ('subjective') career aspirations and ('objective') institutional opportunities. For instance, he repeatedly attempted to enter college and the art academy without any success. Also, Armen

was hardly able to articulate his political views because of the secret police. For these reasons, he increasingly turned to a small world of fellow Armenians who acknowledged his artistical skills and shared his political values. Armen readily integrated into this group of ethnic activists because, according to his own statements, he has a considerable measure of community orientation. Also, there is a facet of his habitus which I call 'biographical passivism'. He considers the potential for controlling his life course to be rather low. In other words, he plays down the individual's opportunities for being the master of one's own fate - a trait typical of many cases where a professional career turned out to be rather unsuccessful.

This biographical passivism can be illustrated by the following quotations. When speaking about his work he says that "however you draw, however you paint, whatever you do - I said - that's in the genes, that remains, the East [Armenia, J.A.]." Accordingly, consciousness of one's national affiliation is not a matter of one's free will or actions but "that's nothing I think; it's Armenian history that thinks so." He frequently plays down the role of his own decisions and says that a considerable part of human behavior is genetically determined. Therefore, nationality is seen as a matter that comes 'naturally' from a biologically interpreted heritage.

**2) Family as socializing agent and ethnocultural networks.** It seems that early socializing influences play a significant role in the formation of a national consciousness among Armenians in Petersburg. The milieu Armen comes from has played a significant role in the 'calibration' of the habitus based perceptiveness for ethnic differences. The construction of ethnic boundaries thus happened at an early stage of his childhood. Although it is difficult to infer from his statements in the interview the 'real' situation of his early childhood, there is much evidence that his parents and grandparents raised him in a climate highly conducive to the development of national attitudes. The only thing Armen tells us about his grandfather is that "grandpa was a patriot [...] an Armenian hero". Armen calls his father and mother "pure-blooded Armenians" who strictly obeyed Armenian traditions, e.g. religious holidays and family feasts.

The significant role of early socializing influences of the family goes hand in hand with the relevance of the family's historic past. Some of the other interviewees' pedigrees allegedly go back to the early 12th century. Even with Armen, whose grandparents were commoners, there is a rather high need to construct a great past of his family. His grandfather, he says, was a personal acquaintance of General Andranik, one of Armenia's most famous figures in the struggle for independence during the events around 1917. Thus the family is the place where national experiences from before the time of the Bolshevik revolution are stored up and handed down until today in the stock of knowledge of many Armenians.

Individuals trying to maintain a certain degree of political freedom in the Soviet Union had to turn to their immediate milieu and best friends to find acknowledgement and confirmation for their actions. Closely knit networks were an intermediating feature of the relationship between individual and state. Thus informal communities have succeeded in becoming a potential subversive threat to the oppressive state encroaching on the individuals'

small life worlds. As early as in 1987, in the first phase of perestroika, a Soviet sociologist in a book on ethnic relations in Leningrad recognized some difficulties in reaching Leningrad's Armenians with the public media. She concludes that "'ethnolocal' contacts of the neighborhood [...] with the innerfamilial ties remain as one of the main channels for the transmission and preservation of the traditional culture of the people" (Staravoitova 1987: 146). Even today, in the absence of a strong state, there seems to remain a relatively distinct split between the private sphere of the family and the realm of the public, media, and the state.

3) **The ethnic view of society and objects of everyday life.** Armen's habitus combines what I would like to call 'ethnic congruence', 'exclusivism' and 'ethnic coloring'. His national point of view is not only a political attitude (e.g. "I'm proud of being an Armenian") but it also marks his perception toward his social environment and towards things of everyday life.

a) **Armen's attempts at 'congruence' of ethnic individual and collectivity.** By this I mean a tendency grounded by the habitus to assert that his national point of view applies to every member of the national group. In other words, he postulates a congruence of the individuals' attitudes, norms and characteristics with those of the ethnic group. This mode of reasoning is pervasive throughout the interview. To provide an example:

Armen: "[...] the religious tradition, all the holidays were obeyed. All that was there. [...] The most important ones for us were Easter, New Year, our family celebrations. Well, that was not only with us, in general, [but] in the whole of Armenia."

Here Armen starts out with the customs of his family. Then he goes on to claim that these traditions were obeyed everywhere in Armenia. Typically, passages like that are characterized by a mixture of statements of factual and normative claims. Armen not only says that *all* Armenians have a national attitude (factual dimension) but he thinks that national values are *good* (normative dimension). In Armen's reasoning there is both a congruence of the individual with the collectivity and a congruence of perceptive and evaluative statements.

Given that Armen emphasizes the influence of heredity ('genes'), as it was mentioned above, his national outlook can be characterized in the following way: a) every Armenian is a national being who sticks to the customs and the way of life of the Armenian community, b) this is desirable, c) this is a matter of genes.

It is interesting to note that Armen develops a significant emotional attachment to his new home city Leningrad/Petersburg. Several times he says that he is proud of being a Petersburgian. This means that the mechanism of giving one's place of residence a positive value in itself also holds true after he comes to Leningrad, where his ethnic identity is reinforced by a largely Russian environment. Thus it is no contradiction for Armen to be both an Armenian and a Petersburgian.

b) **The exclusive relation to the non-Armenian environment.** It has already been mentioned that in Soviet times Armen had trouble with the political police because of his 'ethnoliberal' activities. For instance, when he speaks about the relation of his circle with the KGB he



contrasts “our friends” (*nashi*) with “them” (the police). It seems that the political tensions with the state have fostered an exclusive view of society. When he was asked about the image of ‘the Russian’ among Armenians he says:

Armen: “[...] Well, that’s clear: lazybones! [...] He who has been enabled to, has to work to help his friends. In Armenia it’s like that. [...] This is the Armenians’ character. [...] If the Russian had this character, I’d be glad.”

Here Armen constructs a national character of the Armenians which is to distinguish them from the Russians. This is Armen’s ‘ideological’ means of interpreting the tensions he has with Russian society. Interestingly, he explicitly explains the failure of his application to Petersburg’s art academy by referring to his national affiliation.

Armen: “[...] when they didn’t admit me to the *Mukhinskoe uchilishche* [an art academy in Petersburg] - I even know who, why - because I’m an Armenian.”

Again, Armen contrasts the ‘innocent’, aspiring Armenian (himself) with a Russian environment that frustrates his plans. The constant failure to realize his plans in Petersburg helped strengthen his anti-Russian feelings. Thus the lack of professional acknowledgement and the political conflicts with the KGB intensify an exclusive point of view towards the Russians.

c) **‘Ethnic coloring’**. A further point in Armen’s habitus based relation to the social world is his view of the objects of everyday life. There is a tendency to consider them to be ethnic symbols, i.e. they are not just carpets, dishes, paintings, etc. but elements of one’s national culture. I have called this tendency ‘ethnic coloring’ because these objects are seen as having an ‘ethnic hue’, i.e. their symbolic function is ethnic. The following quotation may serve as an example:

Armen: “We’ve always had the Eastern [Armenian] cuisine. Helen [Armen’s wife] cooks both in the Greek and the Armenian way. And when there’s *borshch* [a Russian kind of soup] at our home, then it is a stylized *borshch*, but after an Armenian motive. Yeah, all that remained in the daily life.”

It becomes clear that the *borshch* in Armen’s family is not simply *borshch* we are familiar with. He perceives Armenian elements in the *borshch* and shows that he continues to stick to the Armenian way of life.

The analysis of the material has shown that Armen’s national orientation is highly responsive to the course of his life and the kind of social situations and contexts he is exposed to. Armen’s handling of deviations from the normal or expected biographical course reveals an ongoing struggle to reconstruct his biography in terms of an understandable unity. Obviously, the constant difficulties of realizing his professional and political plans go hand in hand with a habitus that is marked by a rather passive outlook on his life and an exclusive view of the society he lives in. At the same time, ethnic explanations of dealing with biographical complexity gain considerable momentum. In this respect, ‘being Armenian’ is a key variable in the construction of a coherent biography, reflecting not only the relationship of

the individual towards one's biography, but also towards the position in one's family's history, relevant symbolic objects of everyday life, and society. Armen's habitus gives rise to a national identity that is not only important in terms of his political activity. His whole life world centers around ethnic principles. Armen, therefore, has an 'ethnically' oriented habitus; his ethnic interpretations are important means to act upon and interpret the social world.

To recapitulate the character of Armen's habitus, I characterized his views about his biographical potential as 'biographical passivism'. Also, I mentioned the role of the family and Staravoitova's 'ethnolocal' contacts as a major socializing force during Armen's childhood. To speak specifically about his ethno-national outlook there are at least three elements: First, the striving for 'congruence' between the individual and the collectivity, and between matters of fact and normative claims. Second, his exclusive point of view toward the Russians. And third, the tendency to give objects of everyday life an ethnic 'hue' ('ethnic coloring').

This illustration is not to imply that ethnicity has in most cases a nationalist content and that nationalism is a prevalent phenomenon in today's Russia. In fact, nationalism in the Russian Federation seems to be neither more nor less pervasive than in most countries of the West. Ethnic behavior can even be decidedly non-nationalist, i.e. the outcome of certain kinds of constraining situation with no strong 'inner' feelings or ethnic attachment necessary. Therefore, in order to contrast Armen's case with a mostly cosmopolitan account, I will give a short account of Leon Pomogeli.

### **Leon Pomogeli - The value-committed cosmopolitan**

Leon Pomogeli was born in 1939 in Leningrad. His aristocratic ancestors were, according to Leon, known in Tiflis and throughout Transcaucasia for their brilliance. Several generations ago, members of the Pomogeli clan came to Leningrad to become doctors and scientists. Leon's grandfather was a director of three institutes and Vice-President of the Russian Academy of Science. According to his passport Leon's parents are both Armenian. This, however, is not quite correct since his biological father, who he never knew, was Russian. Since his real father wasn't around when he was small Leon was adopted by his grandfather, the famous Armenian scientist. Without learning Armenian properly, Leon grew up in a family environment where members of very different nationalities came together. He studied physics in Leningrad and became a successful scientist as well.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Leon was increasingly concerned over Russia's and Armenia's moral and socioeconomic development. Although never very interested in matters of national interest he has turned toward Petersburg's Armenian community in the last few years. First of all, he wants to help those who suffered from the deterioration of the material situation in Russia. As state institutions like the institute he works for are no longer able to provide the support people need to cope with the present hardships, Leon was forced to recognize the ethnic community as one of the few places where people can organize networks

and try to take over the functions the state is no longer able to fulfill. Leon had long felt a desire to help others in need and therefore established contact with the Armenian community, which is led by Petersburg's Armenian church. With the help of Petersburg's Armenian priest, he now organizes charity funds and efforts to collect money and support for the poor.

1) **Biographical activism.** Leon refers to his biography in a different way than Armen - an indication of a very different habitus. While there is a certain degree of defeatism with Armen, Leon has a more active stance toward the possibilities his life offers him. In this view, wo/man creates his/her own (life) history:

Leon: “[...] Yeah, and therefore I say as well that I believe in the possibilities and in the very great possibilities of the human being.”

The individual plays a considerable role in Leon's view of man and society. She/he is the master of one's own biographical development. It seems that this attitude is reinforced by his successful career as a scientist. It was in many cases possible for him to put his professional plans into reality. Once he was even offered a post as a director of a laboratory in Georgia, which he declined because he wanted to stay in Leningrad. Unlike Armen, Leon is free to choose between various possibilities. His profession, not the ethnic community, is the most important point of reference in his relation to the social environment. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that he wants his children to study Western languages instead of Armenian.

Even his notion of religion is highly individualistic.

Leon: “[...] everybody has his own god in himself” who does not have to represent a “concrete figure”.

Thus Leon tends to think matters of moral interest in an abstract, individualistic and highly universal way.

2) **Non-national family history.** His view of the familial past is characterized by the emphasis of one's achievements, less by the role of his national affiliation. Ethnicity is only of second-rate relevance. His ancestors are not famous heroes in the national liberation movement, as in the case of Armen, but “very famous doctors in Tiflis”, the Georgian capital (which was until 1917 largely dominated by Armenians). They came to Petersburg and successfully finished their degrees at the university. There was a large circle of friends around Leon's grandfather. However,

Leon: [...] “it was not an isolated Armenian one. There were very many Jews. There were very many Georgians. And I inherited this circle [...]”

In other words, Leon's past is truly multicultural. Various sorts of ethnic influences came together and blended in a specific way. In a way, he represented the modern version of the new Soviet, transnational man.

3) **Ethnic ‘color-blindness’ and altruistic universalism.** Unlike Armen, Leon has considerable difficulty in determining what is Armenian or not. He lacks the perceptive

dispositions that help identify something to belong to this or that community. When he speaks, e.g., about *kalmytskii chai*, a certain kind of strong beverage, he is not sure whether this can be considered an Armenian specialty. His habitus does not allow him to ‘properly’ perceive something to be Armenian. In pondering over this problem, he says:

Leon: “[...] And maybe this not only refers to Armenians but maybe to the whole Caucasian region. I don’t want to say that this is simply something Armenian but something Caucasian.”

The fact that he distinguishes *kalmytskii chai* as a Caucasian tradition proves that it is not easy for him to define boundaries between ethnic symbolic systems. In contrast to Armen, the Caucasian ‘salad bowl’ is for Leon not a region of clearly separated peoples but a generic culture unit in its own right.

A similar thing can be observed when Leon says that he was first confronted with nationalist ideas when he entered elementary school. Only through the Soviet school, where young members of very different cultures were commonly educated, did he begin to understand the meaning of nationalism. However, the indifferent attitudes toward national distinctions he was exposed to in his parents’ house was to leave a permanent mark in his habitus. It is no surprise, then, that he had friends among many nationalities.

Once he was invited to speak with the Armenian *katolikos*, the head of the Armenian Church. Leon, however, declined to attend this meeting.

“[...] but I had heard that he [the *katolikos*] speaks Armenian in any case and I didn’t go there because I felt ill at ease with that.”

This is evidence that Leon feels no ‘natural’ emotional attraction toward his fellow countrymen whereas Armen actively organizes group meetings from which he can draw positive feelings.

Leon tends to emphasize the universal aspect of the human being as opposed to the human being as a member of small cultural groups. The dignity of the human being is for Leon a value in its own right. Therefore, he feels committed to materially contribute to his fellow men in the present time of economic decline. Because of the collapse of the Soviet state individuals today have to turn to other sources than the state to find help against the hardships of daily life. Leon reactivates the contacts he has had with Armenians since his early childhood. Although, as it was shown, he has almost atheistic views of God and is mostly indifferent toward national values he turns to the Armenian priest in Petersburg to suggest carrying out relief measures for the poor in Armenia and Petersburg. Especially in Armenia, where Leon had recently been, the situation is miserable because of the earthquake in 1988, the armeno-aserbaijani war and the general decline of industrial production in the CIS states. Being economically secure himself, he frequently organizes collections and trips to Armenia to support the people there.

It is interesting how Leon deals with the renewed contacts with the ethnic group given that his outlook is mostly non-national. On the one hand he knows that he is expected to publicly profess to be an Armenian, on the other hand his habitus does not enable him, in most cases, to construct a coherent and stable ethnic identity. The tension between his national and

his cosmopolitan identity can be seen, for instance in the following quotation. When asked what it means to be an Armenian Leon says:

“Well, you know... my family name [which has a Georgian ending!] bears a great and not at all simple honor and obligation... well, not that I [feel] pressure, but I feel responsibility that I represent this lineage, this name, and in about this way I act vis-à-vis nationality.”

It becomes clear that he tries to avoid the question of what constitutes an Armenian by referring to the responsibility he has of his name. For him his national affiliation is only a derivation of the familial past. By referring to his family's past Leon tries to cover the contradictions in his relations with the ethnic community. The expectations to behave as an 'authentic' Armenian cannot be met because Leon lacks the socializing background. Therefore, he is rather evasive as soon as it comes to questions about his national attitudes. There is an internationalist view dominating in his outlook, which can be illustrated by the pride he takes in the fact that he is sometimes mistaken for a Jew, a Georgian or a Russian.

To sum up what has been said about Leon, we can mention that the socializing influence of the family has led to a habitus that allows for a high degree of tolerance or even indifference toward ethnic issues. I called his inability of perceiving clear ethnic differences 'ethnic color-blindness'. Also, both the social milieu and his professional success has led to a view of society which stresses the individuals' potential of change. His universal values are strong enough to predominate over the influence of the ethnic community to imbue him with pride of his national affiliation. Neither he nor his family experienced a general decline of the social status in the decades after the Bolshevik revolution and Stalin's death. When the reforms in the late 80s began, Leon had long established himself in his profession and among his friends. Unlike Armen, Leon's habitus is one of the most 'Western' ones of the sample. Leon represents to a high degree the modernizing aspect of the Soviet system.

The two cases presented provide analytical illustrations from within the life world of concrete individuals. The question now is: How are these habitus related to the institutional and political system of the Soviet Union? In the following section I will present some observations concerning the political climate and the social atmosphere in the former Soviet Union with a view towards integrating what was learned from the two cases.

## **Was the emerging nationalism of the late 80s bred by the institutional system of the Soviet state?**

There are many contradictory points to be mentioned to discuss the role of the Soviet state and its ideology in the formulation of nationalist ideas in the past. Neither the Leninist policy of nationality nor the increase of the socioeconomic level of the population can be clearly understood as being either a clear prop or an obstacle to nationalism. Maybe Soviet ethnos theory had positive effects toward the emergence of nationalism. But similar to Western multicultural thoughts ethnos theory can be understood both in a way to foster the construction of cultural differences and to provide a normative 'solution' to national strife. At any rate, these three points deserve some more discussion.

1) Though hardly a nationalist program, the official doctrine of national relations ('Leninist policy of nationalities') was mostly positive toward the realization of national ideas and cultures). Although the ultimate goal was to create the *homo sovieticus*, a kind of blend of all Soviet nationalities, it was commonplace to assume that this was a spontaneous and voluntary process. The idea was that nationalism would disappear in the long run if everything was done to ensure the free development of the nationalities. Therefore, the Soviet Union was structured according to the national principle, i.e. every republic had its titular nation, like the Armenians in the Armenian republic. It is no contradiction, therefore, that many interviewees are both nationally conscious people and very positive toward the Soviet nationality policy or even toward the general political idea of the Soviet system. Thus against its professed intentions the 'Leninist policy of nationalities' led to the preservation of the national consciousness of ethnic groups in the Soviet Union (Connors 1984).

2) The case of Leon shows that there was a supranational elite in the Soviet Union - one of the first signs of the coming of the 'Soviet man'. Being educated in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance, the advancing classes of the intelligentsia centered the main goals of their life around a successful career. However, the remarkable increase of formal education and the general advancement of the masses since the early 20s not only led to a supranational modernizing elite but also to increased opportunities for members of national minorities to articulate their views. Therefore, nationalism has been above all a matter of the professional intelligentsia. In addition, dissenting groups of urban intellectuals were forced, in a way, to take on an ethnic veil in order to organize their political aims (cf. Armen's case). Since the official state doctrine was rather positive toward the free development and realization of national aspirations (cf. ethnos theory, Leninist policy of nationalities), national and human rights groups went well together until the collapse of the Soviet Union. The role of higher education and the general increase of the socioeconomic level remain, therefore, highly ambivalent toward the development of nationalism.

3) In a way, an offspring of the Leninist policy of nationalities was the development of Soviet cultural anthropology after the Second World War by Yulian Bromlei (1983) and, in a less 'official' version, by Lev Gumilev (1989). Better known under its name 'ethnos theory', it is postulated that the ethnic unit ('ethnos') undergoes various stages of cultural development. Ethnos theory is a highly primordial approach and has little to do neither with Western Marxism nor with cultural anthropology as practiced in Western institutions. In this view the ethnos is a biologically integrated unit of human beings that is held together by a certain kind of inherent energy (*passionarnost'*). The theoretical underpinnings of Soviet contributions to the national question are by no means clearly class oriented. The heritage of this 'bio-multicultural' ethnos theory can still be strongly felt among many intellectuals and nationalists in present-day Russia (cf. Armen).

Yet even the role of Soviet ethnos theory does not indicate that nationalism is the master key for understanding the past and present development of the Russian Federation. It seems clear in hindsight that the role of nationalism should not be exaggerated for the dissolution of the Soviet Empire. I would prefer to see the collapse in terms of tensions in the institutional framework of the state, i.e. the central authority was no longer able to exert the necessary degree of control to hold the huge mass of land together. Only after this failure could nationalism really come to the fore as a driving force toward the fragmentation of the Soviet Union. The case of Leon shows that even highly non-national individuals have to turn to ethnic communities to deal with the changed situation. The absence of central bureaucratic control forces the population to organize in different ways - with nationalism as a possible 'solution'. Many people in the Russian Federation seem to consider nationalism a kind of faddish phenomenon that will vanish as soon as Russia's socioeconomic development will be more stable. At present nationalism is primarily a means of coping with the increased complexity of one's life world and a mode of reacting to the disappearance of the integrating and ideological function of the state.

## Conclusion

To conclude this paper, I will try to discuss the meaning and the prospects of nationalism in Russia.

Individuals need to come to terms with the complexity of social life. There are no natural categories or givens that may help solve this need. Only by longterm processes of interactive socialization do stable dispositions of perception and evaluation emerge that bring some order into this complexity. Bourdieu's habitus is a key concept to explain this process. The habitus as perceptive dispositions generating at once the individuals' actions is always to be seen in the context of their life histories and, more generally, of the social space of which they are a part. Ethnic interpretations are products of a socially acquired habitus. This habitus is a differentiating structure in that it enables the individual to generate sense by meaningfully ordering the social world. By doing so, it creates individuals that *are* different from each other. Social differences are translated into incorporated, even corporal differences.

Today, with old certainties giving way to rapid change the national point of view is an important way to make sense of the increased diversity of social life. Both Western observers and those involved with the changes in Russian society 'from below' have frequently referred to nationalism and 'the ethnic revival' (Smith) to bring some unity into the contradicting movements of the last few years. However, as soon as we come to the micro level it turns out that national identity and the transformation process are more heterogeneous and contradictory than these concepts may suggest. Comparing Armen and Leon we see that ethnic activity is possible in the framework of very different habituses. What seems to be crucial is less the 'content' of the attitudes and perceptions of the ethnic activists but rather the functional gap opening up after many of the bureaucratic and integrating functions of the state ceased to be fulfilled.

One of the most important aspects of this research is the attempt to recontextualize the individuals' actions and their behaviors in concrete situations. Ethnicity is not some natural given, but the product of an action generating habitus. Thus ethnic behavior does not go back to an ethnic 'essence' but rather to the habitus as a stable set of perceptive, evaluative and action guiding dispositions. For Armen to become a nationalist it was an important condition to live in an intolerant state that fostered to think of political problems in black and white but who allowed some degree of scope for national 'folklore' groups. The case of Armen illustrates how disappointment of one's professional expectations and conflicts with the state can harden exclusive views on nationalism. Similarly, Leon's decision to be active in the Armenian community despite the fact that his values hardly fit with those expected of him can only be understood against the background of the political, socioeconomic and moral crisis in today's Russia.

All in all, it becomes clear that nationalism in the Russian Federation is an ambivalent and contradictory phenomenon. Both at the micro and macro level nationalism can take on very different shades. An activist like Leon, for instance, might be labelled a nationalist by the outside observer because the ethnic community has become one of the centers of his actions.



However, it should have become sufficiently clear that Leon relies on the Armenian community because of the specific circumstances resulting from the collapse of the Soviet state.

Armen, on the other hand, can much more easily be described as a nationalist. However, his political activity is primarily connected with the dissident movement. Despite the significant role attached to the genetic factor his national attitude is determined by considerable patriotism toward Leningrad/Petersburg. To be sure, it would be too simple to see a clear connection between his failures in getting professional acknowledgement and the formation of his national perspective. The interview material includes cases where strictly national attitudes go hand in hand with a highly consistent and 'successful' biographical course and vice versa.

Both Armen and Leon represent in a way parallel but contradicting tendencies of the ongoing social process in the Russian Federation. Instead of a 'transformation process' denoting a rather one-dimensional development, as indicated above, I would prefer to discuss these social changes under the term 'transformation paradox'. By transformation paradox I mean that there are parallel movements of universalization and particularization. On the one hand there has been a movement calling for generally valid freedom rights and for a parliamentary system according to the Western model. On the other hand the old centralized state was threatened by a growth of particularistic tendencies. The incapability of the central authorities to guarantee the functioning of the federal state ushered in the demise of the old institutional order and evoked the consciousness of one's own particular culture. To put it briefly, the collapse of the Soviet Union was characterized by both the prevalence of universal democratic principles and the particularization of society's integrating modes. However, the situation in Russia is still too volatile for nationalism to take on a less ambivalent character and too volatile for us to allow far-reaching predictions about the future role of nationalism in Russia.

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