

V. STANLEY VARDYS

## Geography and Nationalities in the USSR: A Commentary

In the wake of the rising interest in Soviet nationalities and the problems that the nationality phenomenon produces for the Soviet political and economic system, it is gratifying to read a geographer's discussion of regionalism in this huge Soviet state. The nationality question can be best elucidated by interdisciplinary studies; logically it follows that the question of regionalism does not belong exclusively to the jurisdiction of geographers and economists.<sup>1</sup> It is obvious, however, from reading Professor Hooson's article that geographers can make a considerable contribution to the understanding of the development and prospects of Soviet nationalities.

The connection between regionalism and nationalities is not artificial. Soviet regionalism, whether considered in geographical, historical, or other terms, is intertwined with the prospects of nationalities, because these groups provide much of the demographic matrix in which development occurs and to which the Kremlin's political decisions apply. The political aspect, furthermore, is especially pronounced in the Soviet case, because the large, compactly settled national groups live in regions adjacent to the borders of the Soviet state; theoretically their republics have the right to secede from the Soviet Union. The Soviet state itself was organized to accommodate these nationalities, and they are supposed to share in decision-making as well as in the benefits that the Soviet system can confer.<sup>2</sup>

### *Geographical Values*

As a political scientist, I have no quarrel with the general assumption in Professor Hooson's paper that broad geographical considerations are important for the development of civilization. History suggests diverse examples to support this point, such as the importance of the Mediterranean basin to the growth of Western civilization or the more universal experience that a given ratio between natural resources and population influences a country's political and

1. For an ably stated case that Soviet nationality studies should be interdisciplinary see Edward Allworth, ed., *Soviet Nationality Problems* (New York and London, 1971), pp. 10 ff.

2. See the statement by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, *Pravda*, Feb. 22, 1972, pp. 1-2.

economic system. Furthermore, one can agree, as far as it goes, with Professor Hooson's view that the reduction of the geographical "factor" to a mere physical phenomenon is inadequate. Physical geography indeed ceases to be merely physical once man enters the picture. Man reacts to his geographical environment, and his reaction is expressed in changes he inflicts on this environment. Man's relation to location, landscape, and so forth, is creative and imperial. He acts upon his environment in order to preserve life and to supply his needs, and by doing so tries to subdue the elements to his will. By acting, man not only transforms his natural surroundings, but in turn he is influenced by them. Individual behavior and social organization thus are conditioned and affected by man's relation to his physical and biological environment. A number of writers of past centuries—Frederick Jackson Turner and Halford J. Mackinder of more recent years, for example—have noted this relationship and have helped to clarify it in certain circumstances. What is civilization itself if not a creative conflict between man and his geography, fed by man's need and desire to use the environment and its resources for his own survival and comfort? The products of this creative conflict are values of civilization that secure and enrich his existence.

Professor Hooson, however, speaks of geographical values and a geographical point of view. Actually, he proposes a concept of *Kulturphilosophie* that is rooted in geographical elements. These geographical values are to form the basis for the "philosophy of man—in his role as an inhabitant and transformer of the earth." This is a pretty large order and claim. Professor Hooson thus seeks not a better recognition of geographical factors but a recognition of geographical philosophy that some geographers informally call "geographyism." He would like to substitute values that this geographical philosophy interpolates for the geographical "factors" and establish the former as the foundation for doing away with physical or ethnic-administrative identification of geographical regions.

The concept of geographical value thus is crucial in our context. In Professor Hooson's paper the discussion of it is of necessity very limited, but it is so important for his theory of regionalization that a reading "into it" must be risked, if necessary, with the help of his other writings. Geographical value seems to be understood as the value of the industrially exploited environment, space, and resources for the needs of national power of a sovereign—that is, the ruler. Geographical value thus encompasses technological and other development. Furthermore, it is not static but changes with new discoveries of natural resources or the movement of populations. Geographical value therefore is related to resources, skills, time, and the ruler's economic and political power.

### *Identification of Regions*

As further examination shows, this concept of geographical philosophy is used as the main criterion for identifying separate regions in the Soviet Union. In his book, *The Soviet Union*, Hooson lists six criteria for defining regions: "(1) scale of contribution to the national economy as a whole; (2) rate of population (especially city) growth; (3) relative importance of *accessible* resources; (4) economic specialization which will necessarily, in many cases, involve a combination of agricultural and industrial specialisms; (5) a certain community of historical associations; (6) ethnic considerations where they actually loom large in the distinctiveness of a region."<sup>3</sup> None of these criteria are focused on physical features of geography, but the first four generally belong to the author's concept of geographical value. The latter two criteria deal with another kind of characteristic—the historical background—and with ethnic identity.

Thus a region is identified by a measurement that covers geographical values *as well as* cultural, social, and political characteristics. Professor Hooson's criteria are reasonably clear and meaningful and therefore acceptable. It is also understood that precision in drawing up regional borders is difficult to achieve and depends on the greater or lesser emphasis given certain of the criteria of classification. Among these criteria, however, I miss "regional consciousness," unless of course the historical community associations and ethnic considerations are supposed to cover it. If regionalization is to be of analytical as well as practical value, regional consciousness must be identified, because it "is a form of group consciousness that derives from a sense of homogeneity of the area,"<sup>4</sup> and an area cannot be a "region" if it does not share certain characteristics—that is, if it lacks much in homogeneity, if it includes features that are too disparate. Another point that needs to be stressed is the requirement that the geographical value and the historic-ethnic-consciousness criteria be applied in a balanced fashion that does violence neither to geography nor ethnicity, neither to geographical values nor to those of group consciousness.

Professor Hooson emphasizes the criteria of geographical values. This concentration explains why the author's regional scheme is somewhat different from others and very different from that of the Soviets. Professor Hooson's geographical and historico-ethnic judgments converge only in regard to the Ukraine, but here too he disregards not only administrative distinctions but also ethnic ones by including Moldavia (easier understood) and Volgograd

3. David Hooson, *The Soviet Union: People and Regions* (Belmont, Calif., 1968), pp. 122–23.

4. On regional consciousness and criteria for classification of regions see Preston E. James and Clarence F. Jones, eds., *American Geography: Inventory and Prospect* (Syracuse, 1954), pp. 21–68; quotation, p. 51. Reference courtesy of Professor Gary Thompson.

(less clear) in the region, because, in his view, the logic of the existing industrial process demands it. Geography and ethnicity remain in conflict in the Caucasian region (no. 9), which includes not only Transcaucasia but a generous portion of the North Caucasus and the Volga delta. This region might be split in two, as it was by Soviet planners in 1963, because there are physical, industrial, and demographic characteristics that clearly warrant such division.<sup>5</sup> Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia constitute a concept and identity of Transcaucasia now known for more than a half-century.

After raising doubts about the southern regions, however, I find it extremely difficult to accept the lumping together of the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania with the Leningrad area and Belorussia. It should be said that such a classification of the region is found more, rather than less, frequently in the works of Western geographers after World War II.<sup>6</sup> It also is proper to point out that such identification is not new: during World War II the Germans used it for the administrative province of Ostland. It is, of course, accurate to say that there are similarities in landscape, soil, and climate, accessibility of natural resources, and also industrial development between the Baltic republics, Belorussia, and the Leningrad area. But it strikes one as rather strange to read that Gomel and Vitebsk are "Baltic" (region) cities or that the "damp, cool, podzolic conditions [of the Baltic region] can hardly support a first-rate, economical agriculture and the large rural component in many areas only reinforces the impression of agrarian depression, inviting comparison with the under-developed world."<sup>7</sup> Historically we know only of cities in the Baltic republics or Baltic provinces as "Baltic," and Gomel and Vitebsk belong to neither. In agriculture, furthermore, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania certainly are not "depressed." Their agricultural production is among the highest and the best in the Soviet Union. Estonia and Latvia, finally, are also the most urbanized of the Soviet republics. There is, to my way of thinking, an identification crisis for the Baltic republics. Better to say that geographic values here conflict with historical and ethnic consciousness.

Although there are geographic similarities in the region, it breaks up at least three ways in terms of ethnic origins, historical development, patterns of culture, and regional consciousness. Ethnically the Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians are not Slavs; their history only partially overlaps with that of the other areas. Culturally their heritage is essentially West European, and it is

5. See Chauncy D. Harris, *Cities of the Soviet Union* (Chicago, 1970), pp. 149-54.

6. See, for example, Paul E. Lydolph, *Geography of the U.S.S.R.* (New York, 1964), p. 103 (2nd ed., 1970, p. 125). Lydolph justifies inclusion of these disparate areas into a single region because "it is a fairly homogeneous area in terms of physical landscape and economic development."

7. Hooson, *Soviet Union*, pp. 247, 249.

still very pronounced, especially when considered against a Soviet Russian backdrop. There is in the three republics a regional consciousness among the natives that is shared neither by the Belorussians nor the population of Leningrad. The Balts, furthermore, are strongly nationalistic, with a distinct sense of separateness from the Russians and Belorussians. Although in urbanization and some other indices Lithuania comes closer to Belorussia than Estonia or Latvia, their combined urban percentage is higher than that of any other region identified in Professor Hooson's scheme, their income per capita takes the first three places in the Soviet Union,<sup>8</sup> their institutions provide the best services for the population compared with other Soviet areas, and their quality of life is rather different from the rest. All of these characteristics distinguish these republics from the Leningrad and Belorussian areas. The cumulative effect of this distinction has produced a Soviet view that the Baltic republics are "zagranitsa," though "sovetskaia i nasha."<sup>9</sup>

I suggest that in view of such conflicts between geographical and historico-ethnic values, the Soviet regionalization of 1963 and the general Soviet practice are more realistic than Professor Hooson's identification. The Soviets in 1963 settled for the Western region that included the three Baltic republics and the Kaliningrad region as an unremovable appendix.

The basic conclusion that emerges from this consideration is that not only ethnic considerations can do harm to geography, as Professor Hooson suggests about Kazakhstan, but geography also can do violence to historico-ethnic self-consciousness and identification. This is a sensitive point in the Soviet Union and may be one of the reasons why the Soviets have been cautious and slow in experimentation with regional theory.

### *Prospects of Regional Development and Nationalities*

It is quite impossible in this brief commentary to touch on all the points raised by Professor Hooson. In my view, his geographical approach blunts the importance of ethnic-regional consciousness, and although he recognizes the influence of various non-Russian nationalisms, his regional theory does not help us to understand regional development through the eyes of regional people. For example, neither Estonians nor Latvians regret the less rapid growth rate they have now been assigned, and even the Lithuanians, whose industrial level is lower, are writing approvingly about the slower rate of their own industrial development. Industrial development, these people know, encourages Russian immigration, and the Balts do not like it.

8. See Hans-Jürgen Wagener, "The RSFSR and the Non-Russian Republics: An Economic Comparison," *Radio Liberty Research* CRD 399/68 (1968), pp. 12-15.

9. V. Stanley Vardys, "The Baltic Peoples," *Problems of Communism*, September-October 1967, pp. 55 ff.

Professor Hooson shows rather well, however, how Soviet regions are developed for the purpose of strengthening the ruler in Moscow and the dominant ethnic group, the Russians. The author speaks of the dilemma that faces the Soviet planners in choosing which regional development to pursue. Actually, under the party's dictation the planner's task, it seems, is simply to identify regions whose development would ultimately strengthen the central power. If this is so, then the planner's dilemma is to an important degree different from Professor Hooson's suggestion.

The author, however, helps us to understand changes that have occurred in the industrial and demographic make-up of the Soviet Union. He shows that the energy axis has shifted from the Caucasus to West Siberia. Along with that, industrial development has moved from Moscow in a southern direction and then into the Soviet West, attempting to reach all the way to Lake Baikal. This development is coupled with demographic changes. The population in this new energy belt is for the most part Slavic with a very strong Russian component. Russian is the *lingua franca* without competition, although it would be in competition, for example, in Georgia—that “state within a state”—or in the Baltic republics. This means that now Moscow needs to rely much less on the non-Russian regions for industrial and technological strength than in the past. The relative importance of all the important non-Russian areas, taken as a whole, has declined. Thus Hooson confirms conclusions reached by other social scientists using different approaches—namely, that the importance of the Russian-speaking population in the Soviet Union has been on the rise for decades and that the industrial backbone of the country is Russian and is found in strategically safe areas.<sup>10</sup> The Soviets are engaged in nation-building, which is accomplished not merely through Russian migration into Central Asia or the Baltic republics or through conditioning for assimilation in autonomous, ethnically based administrative units, but independently through the development of space and resources in the south and the west of the Russian republic and in Kazakhstan. We can argue whether this process is motivated by inherent geographical considerations or by contrived political decisions, though I suggest the latter is the case in the centrally run Soviet system. Geographical analysis nevertheless confirms the results. Population movement to the new energy and industrial belt has slowed down, but there is no reason to think that it will stop completely, for the development of Siberia will go on with the help of Japanese and American, as well as European, money. Russian migration, specifically, to the Ukraine, the Central Asian republics, Estonia, and especially

10. V. Stanley Vardys, “Verschmelzung der Nationen?” *Osteuropa*, 1968, no. 7, pp. 524 ff.; see also V. S. Vardys, “Altes und Neues in der sowjetischen Nationalitätenpolitik seit Chruschtschows Sturz,” *Osteuropa*, 1968, no. 2, pp. 81–95.

Latvia, shows no signs of stopping. In any case, the economies of the non-Slavic republics have become mere appendixes to the Russian trunk.

Such economic integration and the increasing weight of the Russian element in the country's most important industrial areas (large cities in almost any region are very Russianized as well) do not augur well for the development of non-Russian groups. On the other hand, the decline of the Russian birth rate favors the non-Russians, especially the Turkic and Islamic peoples of Central Asia and Azerbaijan. It must be said, furthermore, that there is no evidence of any non-Slavic union republic losing ethnic strength by assimilation. The Balts, the Transcaucasians, and the Central Asians are losing strength through Russian migration, not through assimilation. The native elements of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan seem to be relatively secure at the present time. The Central Asian birth rate, we can speculate, is likely to create more problems for Soviet planners, and especially politicians, than Professor Hooson suggests. The Baltic republics are in a precarious position. Only Lithuania is left with a safe native majority of 80 percent. The Estonian majority has gone down to 68.2 percent, and the Latvian majority has already been reduced to little more than half, or 56.8 percent. More important in the long run is the decline of Ukrainians in the Ukraine, because this lessens the potential of Ukrainian competition and strength as a pressure group. To a large degree the future of non-Slavic nationalities in the Soviet Union depends on the system's ability to absorb the Ukrainians and to neutralize the effects of the Central Asian birth rate. In terms of geographical values and economic development, the waning of nationality group strength would mean next to nothing. It would affect Soviet demography, however, and strengthen the central government.

There exists a counterforce against this development—namely, the intensifying nationalism of the non-Russian groups, including the Ukrainians. Eventually this nationalism may offset the tendencies of demographic regional Russianization, stunt the Soviet Russian nation-building, and thus force Moscow to revise the Soviet state structure with a view to creating a more genuinely federated union. But this thought belongs to the sphere of hopes and can be forecast neither by geographical methods nor by those of political or social science.