

HELD HOSTAGE BY TRADITION

Liah Greenfeld



LIAH GREENFELD holds the position of University Professor and Professor of Political Science, Sociology and Anthropology at Boston University. She is also the Director of the Institute for the Advancement of the Social Sciences at Boston University. She emigrated from the USSR in 1972 and became an Israeli and then American citizen. Her most prominent works include the following: 'Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity' (1992; published in Russian in 2008), 'The Spirit of Capitalism: Nationalism and Economic Growth' (2001) and 'Nationalism and the Mind: Essays on Modern Culture' (2006)

RJ *What are the key factors that determine the distinct traits* of Russian nationalism – the views of the Russian elite or certain specific characteristics of the Russian culture?*

Neither. The nature of Russian nationalism is a result of the history of the formation of Russian nationalism itself and of the Russian national consciousness.

RJ *What are your thoughts on the process of nation-building in Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union? Do the Russians still consider themselves the dominant group, or has the situation changed?*

To begin with, there is no process of nation-building in any nation that has already been built – that is nonsense. The Russian nation has already been formed since the XVIII century. It existed as a nation during the period of the Soviet Union. Likewise, it continues to exist after the Soviet era, but it is still the same nation that was formed in the XVIII and the early XIX century. The tradition of Russian nationalism is an ethnic and collectivist tradition, and, so far, there are no signs that it is undergoing any change. It is very difficult to change a tradition that is rooted in society, since this is the nature of your culture and essentially determines one's consciousness and the way that people see reality. It determines the way that people think and feel. There are no examples in history when the government, for example, has been able to change the nature of a people's national consciousness by decree.

RJ *What are your thoughts on the Russian elite's recent claims that they want to build a so-called Russian nation – not in the ethnic, but in the civil sense? Does this represent a genuine desire to change something, or is it just a lot of hot air?*

Well, to begin with, let's make sure that we understand their definitions of a 'civic nation' or an 'ethnic nation'? Even provided that we see eye-to-eye on both issues, how can they transform a thoroughly ethnic mentality and tradition into a civic mentality – one that implies a pre-existing civic tradition of a common identity unaffected by one's origins? The task is humongous – after all, we are referring to two completely different images of reality. First and foremost, there must be a real interest on the part of the population in which this transformation is to take place. There must be a real interest in a new vision of reality. Is there such an interest on the part of the Russian populace, all 130 million of them? I doubt that. Even if we presume that such an interest does exist – a transformation of this sort would still require nothing short of a complete re-education of the population. **A new approach to the organisation of public education is required – up to the re-writing of Russian literature, given the fact that the national identity is to a great extent communicated through Russian literature, as well as the re-interpretation of Russian history.** This is an extremely difficult process, even if the leaders of Russia do understand what they are talking about, which I doubt. I doubt that they actually understand the nation in civic terms or that they can accept a model where one identifies himself as a member of a certain group according to his own free will and is accepted as such regardless of one's birthplace or origins.

* In her work entitled 'Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity', Liah Greenfeld distinguishes between five different types of nationalism: civic and individualistic (in the UK and the USA), civic and collectivistic (in France), and, finally, ethnic and collectivistic, always emphasising the dominant nature of a single ethnic group and without any provisions for the integration of ethnic minorities (in Germany and Russia).

RJ *Does the Russian elite have a tendency to espousing nationalistic world views? Do you think that the Russian elite think of the Russian future in ethnic and national terms? Or do they consider nothing beyond their class interests as identifying them as a global caste*



of moguls whose own future is their only agenda, rather than such considerations as the future of the country or hot-winded discussion on nation-building?

I don't really know. To answer such a specific question, one would have to study the elites that you are talking about. Nevertheless, in general, elites tend to think about their own interests in the first place, not just in Russia. But they very often present those interests – to others as well as themselves – as common interests of the people, which they think they represent. And, of course, they want the people in question to be more respectable, more prestigious. Elites are usually very committed to the prestige of their nation. The Russian elite may indeed believe that the dignity of the Russian nation is dependent on its being a civic nation, in which case they would be genuinely interested in presenting their nation as a civic nation. The problem is that, **given the tradition of the elite, none of its representatives are likely to have a coherent notion of a civic nation.**

RJ *In your view, was the Soviet Union truly an attempt to create a civil nation of Soviet citizens and not just an aggregate nation comprised of different ethnic groups? How would you characterise the Soviet model of nation-building?*

There was never any attempt to build a civic nation in the Soviet Union. **The Soviet Union was an empire – just as much as the Russian Empire before it, and, perhaps, even more imperialistic, staying true to the nationalist Russian tradition.** But in addition to carrying on as it had, the Soviet leaders strived for separate national identities to evolve in the periphery. It was owing to the efforts of the Russian nationalists that the nationalisms came into being, for example, in the Ukraine or in the Central Asia. The government of the Soviet Union actually sponsored the

it stayed dominant. The Soviet policies encouraged and helped the development of other nationalists. All those nationalists followed the Russian model – that is, the ethnic model. And so, by encouraging all those nationalists, the Russian government of the Soviet Union actually precipitated the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

RJ *Russians are proud of their Victory in the Great Patriotic War (World War II), as well as certain other achievements of the Soviet period. Does that mean that the Russian people are still proud of the Soviet Union while disregarding its multinational nature and believing it to be a predominantly Russian state?*

In the late 1980s, the Moscow-based Institute of Anthropology and Ethnography conducted a number of very large-scale surveys as part of their research of national consciousness in Russia and the other Soviet republics. They discovered that the Russians considered the Soviet Union to be their nation, whereas all the other peoples considered their own republics as their respective nations. The dissolution of the Soviet Union was perceived as a personal tragedy by a large number of Russians because, to them, it was the demise of their Motherland. Also, post-Soviet Russia lost its superpower status, and there were many regrets on this account. Russians were proud of

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creation of separate national intelligentsias which then developed a national consciousness in all the non-Russian areas. Before the Soviet Union, the Russian nationalism was strong, unlike the peripheral nationalisms, and

the Soviet Union – just as they were proud of the Russian Empire before that.

RJ *What is your view about the problem of Russian ethno-nationalism as it exists today? Did it*

merely evolve in absence of any civil nationalism, or was it preceded by a long tradition of ethnic Russian nationalism in Russia?

The tradition of Russian nationalism is ethnic. Russian society perceives political and social reality in ethnic terms. Any change of this tradition would require a complete re-education, and that would most likely only affect the generation of the very young, leaving their parents just as they are. Given the political situation, it is only natural that, in general, national passions are likely to flare up. Russian national passions would have to be ethnic – they cannot be anything else. This is what Russian nationalism is all about historically. So **whenever national sentiment flares up for whatever reasons, the one that is to flare up in Russia would have to be of an ethnic nature.**

RJ *Our Prime Minister recently met with a number of likely representatives of Russian nationalists. Do you think that the Russian elite support their views?*

Let's consider an example of a different Russian government – the government of Czar Nicholas I in the XIX century. The state doctrine of that period can be referred to as one of 'official nationalism', with the nationalism in question obviously being ethnic. But at the same time, the official nationalists that constituted the Russian government were rather opposed to the Slavophiles, which was a nativist movement within Russian nationalism. The government did not really support them because they were too radical and revolutionary for the government, and they endangered the order existing in the country. There was some consensus between the two groups on the one hand. However, on the other hand, the real politics of the situation prevented the wholehearted support for such a movement by the government. And this shall always be the case insofar as the government is concerned, whatever views any of its individual representatives may espouse in private. The Russian government is bound to be nationalistic in the ethnic sense – they wouldn't know any better. At the same time, any government would be interested in maintaining order in the country, in preventing violence or the rise of opposition, as well as making a good impression abroad. Russian state figures are thus, unlikely to support the more radical expressions of ethnic nationalism, even if they privately agree with the principles thereof.

Liah Greenfeld was speaking with Yuliya Netesova, Dmitriy Uzlaner and Raisa Barash

RUSSIA IS PLURICULTURAL



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Exclusively for RJ

The process of nation and state building in Russia is very different from that in the United States. The United States is a relatively new nation, whereas Russia is one of the oldest. There are two key points to consider: first, the political form of the state; and second, the forging of a modern nation. Regarding the first point, the US devised an effective way of managing a vast territory (although there was a terrible Civil War before it was consolidated), while Russia is still looking for an effective state form to institutionalise its diversity and ensure adequate integration across its territory. Russia's distinctive form of ethno-federalism may not be the most effective system, but to paraphrase Churchill's comment on democracy, it is probably better than any alternative.

As for national diversity, while the United States is multicultural, Russia is pluricultural. Multiculturalism is when you have one

dominant culture and then a number of immigrant peoples. In Russia, on the other hand, there is a large number of different native peoples, each with an equal stake in the development of the nation.

The debate regarding the role of ethnic Russians in all of this is far from resolved, but any attempt to give them an enhanced status as the state-building nation would be ruinous for the whole country. The Russian language is the lingua franca, and Russian culture is predominant. This makes it all the more incumbent upon the 'Great Russians' to be sensitive about the concerns of the minority peoples.

The supranational community can only be based on civic principles of equal and shared citizenship, not on the predominance of any particular ethnic group. A balance has to be drawn between ethnic (and religious) identity, and a common affiliation to the political project that we call 'Russia.' ■