

Brief History of Dagestani Nationalities

*Evgeni A. Varshaver, PhD in Sociology, Head of the Group for Migration and Ethnicity Research
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5901-8470>, varshavere@gmail.com*

Abstract

This popular-scientific essay explores the history of Soviet nationalities in the Republic of Dagestan. In contrast to standard essentialist accounts—what might be termed “the history of the peoples”—this text traces the history of how national categories have been employed over the past 200 years. At the beginning of the 20th century, a variety of disparate colonial and vernacular classifications—each delineating differently defined groups—coexisted in Dagestan. Soviet nationalities policy drew on these categories to construct an exhaustive, nationality-based classificatory framework, which was deployed as an instrument of governance. Subsequent developments—including the formal “attachment” of individuals to nationalities via the internal passport system, the creation of nationality-based mechanisms of social mobility, and the emergence of an informal ethnicized structure of social relations in urban settings—fostered a situation in which individuals (who may previously have identified primarily with their rural communities or patrilineal clans, or *tukhums*) came to see themselves as representatives of nationally defined groups. The dissolution of the USSR and the rise of consociational political institutions in the 1990s further reinforced these national categories. More recently, however, signs of their decline have become evident. This shift is linked to the growing influence of transnational Islam, the erosion of meaningful cultural distinctions, and intensified migration to settings governed by alternative classificatory logics. In addition to offering a novel historical account, this essay proposes a methodological response to the question of how constructivist scholarship might engage with topics such as the “history of the peoples.” While the essay does not draw on a broad scientific reference base, it distills insights the author has developed through more than a decade of fieldwork in Dagestan. The result is less a definitive account than a hypothesis—a conceptual framework for future inquiry situated at the intersection of sociological and historical research.

Keywords

ethnicity, Dagestan, history, nationalities

To start, let us note that merely 200 years ago, there were no nationalities in Dagestan. This does not mean that there were no people in Dagestan or that they did not classify one another in ethnic terms. Indeed, the categories that would later become known as “nationalities”—Lak, Dargin, and others—were already in use. However, these terms served to delineate different kinds of groups and phenomena (for example, not people but areas or territories), bore different social meanings, and were not “interwoven” into a singular, coherent classificatory grid. Throughout history, there also existed what might be called “macro-classifiers” (e.g., states and empires), which sought to administratively “conquer” Dagestan by imposing and operationalizing various systems of categorization. Still, the modern, totalizing classificatory framework was only applied—or rather,

gradually introduced—following the incorporation of Dagestan into the Russian state: first under the Russian Empire, and later under the USSR.

Colonization and research worked in tandem. A key figure in the naming of what would later become nationalities in 19th-century Dagestan was the imperial military officer Baron Peter Uslar. Having first served in the Caucasus region, Uslar—upon retirement—produced a series of grammar books on the languages of the Caucasus, focusing primarily on Dagestani languages such as Avar, Kazikumukh, Khurkilin, and Tabasaran (as he designated them). His role in the emergence of nationalities is difficult to overstate, as throughout the future post-Soviet space, national identities would come to be closely linked to language. In general, however, the Russian Empire, though it categorized “the locals,” did so in a relatively soft or ad hoc manner. The everyday classificatory practices of the Russian military, civil administration, and other newcomers were imprecise, inconsistent, and lacked systematic rigor. One can get a sense of these vague and variable classifications in literary works such as Mikhail Lermontov’s *Bela* or Leo Tolstoy’s *Khadzhi-Murat*.

What about the Dagestanis of that time? How did they categorize one another? This question is more complex, insofar as access to the categorical realities of the past is limited by the fact that such knowledge was largely transmitted orally. Nevertheless, we can reasonably infer that these categories, for the most part, aligned with the prevailing forms of social organization, coordination, and mobilization in Dagestan at the time. Jama’ats, military alliances, and local polities—these were the names used, to borrow a constructivist formulation, in the verbal acts of socially placing individuals. These categories, however, were neither standardized nor significantly institutionalized, and there existed no overarching “point of view” that could combine them into a coherent, roster-like classificatory system, whether figurative or literal.

Such a “point of view” emerged with the advent of Soviet rule. It must, however, be contextualized within the broader intellectual climate of the time: Europe was experiencing the full blossoming of national-romantic political ideology. Increasingly, people came to embrace—and internalize as part of their worldview—the belief that humanity consists of distinct nationalities; that each individual belongs to one such nationality; that these nationalities deserve their own political organization; and that, collectively, the world is composed of nations, each properly inhabiting its own sovereign state. By the early 20th century, the notion that nations function—as one might put it in constructivist terms—as “categorical, cultural-difference-based operators of political organization” had become a defining feature of the *Zeitgeist*. This conceptual framework arrived in the USSR through the Bolsheviks, in its German-inflected form, and was promptly incorporated into the foundational logic of Soviet statecraft.

At that time, the USSR sought to model itself after—indeed, to impersonate—the League of Nations, the precursor to the United Nations. Through its nationalities policy, the Soviet leadership aimed to demonstrate that the USSR, too, was a union of free peoples, each with its own form of political organization. The difference, they claimed, was that the Soviet “umbrella structure” provided the most advanced and authentic mechanism for the expression of national will—one that was more progressive, more liberated, and more equitable. It is important to note that, at that historical juncture, there was no fixed terminology in either Russian or other world languages to denote these new political units; the entire concept was still relatively novel. The terms “nations,” “nationalities,” and “peoples” were used interchangeably, both in reference to international entities and to groups within the Soviet Union. Only later did terminological distinctions solidify: “nation” came to refer to external sovereign states, while “nationality” denoted the internal “peoples of the USSR”—though not all of these were granted quasi-statehood or even formal autonomy in the form of a Soviet republic.

In order to construct such a “mini-UN,” however, it was first necessary to determine which “peoples” constituted the USSR in the first place. Thus, the 1920s became a period during which the Soviet state—guided by modernist ideals—undertook the task of categorizing populations that had previously been only vaguely differentiated under the imperial administrative label of *inorodtsy* (Russ. «инородцы», “aliens”). Increasingly, the term “nationality” came to serve as the operative category of classification. Scholars such as Francine Hirsch¹, Yuri Slezkine², and Terry Martin³ have explored the mechanics of this process across various Soviet contexts. But what do we know about Dagestan? By the time of the 1926 census—based primarily on linguistic criteria—a provisional list of 40 nationalities had been compiled for the region. Some of these referred to large populations numbering in the hundreds of thousands, while others denoted single villages (*auls*) or *jama’ats* comprising only a few thousand individuals. Yet this taxonomy, as elsewhere in the USSR, was not the product of idle ethnographic interest. It accompanied a broader societal reorganization in which these newly delineated categories became basic structuring elements. Each recognized “nationality” was promised a suite of benefits: a standardized literary language, cultural development, political representation, and more. Very soon, however, it became evident that developing a literary grammar for every village-scale “nationality” was neither practical nor necessary. Dagestan already featured a

¹ Hirsch, F. (2005). *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. Cornell University Press.

² Slezkine, Yu. (1994). The USSR as a communal apartment, or how a socialist state promoted ethnic particularism. *Slavic review*, 53.2: 414–452.

³ Martin, T. (2001). Affirmative Action Empire: The Soviet Union as the Highest form of Imperialism. In *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. by Suny, R. G. & Martin, T.: 67–92. Oxford University Press.

number of regional lingua franca, and the region lacked the kind of mass, European-style ethnic movements that might have demanded the institutional recognition of each group's "national" rights. As a result, by the 1930s censuses, the number of recognized Dagestani nationalities had been substantially reduced. As Francine Hirsch recounts, in 1936 Stalin declared that "there are around 60 nationalities in the Soviet Union." The 1937 census, overseen primarily by "old school" anthropologists, did not conform to this political line; they declined to adopt the figure and were subsequently repressed. Their replacements—those in charge of the 1939 census—chose not to challenge the "Father of the Peoples" on scientific grounds (assuming such grounds remained). The result was a dramatic reduction in the number of officially recorded Dagestani nationalities to slightly more than ten. As a rule, during this 1939 "reduction," single-village categories were absorbed into larger ones—most often, into the category of Avar.

To what extent, though, did laypeople—ordinary Dagestanis—believe that they truly were whom they had been officially designated to be? Did they, in practice, act on the basis of these categories—both their own and those of others? Apparently, the extent varied considerably. As already noted, the categories were not conjured "out of thin air"; they had been in use in Dagestan prior to the Soviet period, though not in the form of nationalities. Evidently, prior to World War II—and, more broadly, throughout the Soviet era—these classifications were most salient for those integrated into the Soviet apparatus, who were positioned to benefit from the mobility mechanisms it enabled. Nevertheless, quite soon after their official introduction, national categories began to "come to life," animated by a specific chain of historical developments.

These events were deportations. The mass deportations, during which "entire nationalities" were forcibly relocated to Central Asia or Siberia, affected Dagestan tangentially—but meaningfully. A relatively small Chechen population in Dagestan was deported alongside other Chechens. Insofar as the Soviet government sought to "replace" the deported populations, these actions triggered what have sometimes been described as cascade deportations. Entire Dagestani mountain villages were forcibly resettled into the territory of the dissolved Chechen-Ingush ASSR, as well as into areas previously inhabited by Dagestani Chechens, particularly the Akkins. In many cases, residents from the same village—and therefore the same nominal nationality—migrated along shared routes (for example, Laks relocating to the Khasavyurt area). On the plains, these newcomers were identified and categorized in explicitly national terms. That is, if Chechens had been deported because they were Chechens, it made sense to local populations that their replacements were not simply "former residents of village X," but rather, straightforwardly, Laks. These relocation routes were numerous, and they affected a substantial portion of the Dagestani population. As a result, the national

categories that had previously existed only nominally—attached to villages and documents—began to feel increasingly real to those living through these events.

What reinforced this shift even further was the migration from the mountainous *auls* to the plains of Dagestan, which began in the 1930s. This movement was partly spontaneous, and partly encouraged by Soviet policy, as it was easier for the state to provide services and exert administrative control over populations settled on the plains. The migration itself was not typically organized along national lines. However, the plains' residents—having already internalized the concept of Dagestan as a mosaic of distinct nationalities—tended to perceive and interpret these movements not in neutral but in national terms. In the 1950s, researchers of the Manchester school of anthropology, working in African contexts, demonstrated how tribal names were adopted in newly founded mining towns to help newcomers navigate a fluid and unfamiliar social environment. These classificatory labels were often imprecise and generalized, but functionally necessary. Dagestan presents a comparable case: for instance, although the newcomers to the Kumyk village of Kostek were in fact from the village of Sanamakhi, such detail was deemed irrelevant. To most of their new neighbors, they were simply Dargin.

Simultaneously, the discourse of a “multinational Dagestan” began to take shape. According to this discourse, the Republic was a kind of miniature USSR—a conglomerate of peoples or nationalities, each possessing a distinct culture, peacefully coexisting and together forming a uniquely polycultural space. This narrative was reinforced through various forms of imagery, with each nationality assigned its own visual and material signifiers—traditional clothing, weaponry, and other cultural markers. As a result, for many Dagestanis, it was the very term “nationalities” that became the primary conceptual lens—the keyword—through which cultural difference, whether real or imagined, was understood and articulated.

Informal institutional reality soon followed. It was likely by the 1960s–1970s that consociational ideas began to take form and circulate broadly among the population of Dagestan. According to these ideas, resources were to be distributed with explicit regard for nationality, and such distribution should reflect the demographic proportion of each group within the population—whether of Dagestan as a whole or of specific localities. But how were these principles enacted in practice? To what extent—and in which domains—were the corresponding institutions ever formalized? Or were these ideas instead treated as informal mechanisms of governance? The answer, for now, is that such practices were indeed in place, albeit to a limited extent, and were mostly evident in high-ranking administrative appointments (e.g., Communist Party leadership, university rectors, chief medical officers, and so on). A more precise understanding would require further dedicated research. What matters, however, is that by the time Perestroika began, the vast

majority of Dagestanis, first, knew which nationality they belonged to; second, regarded their nationality as personally significant; and third, in one way or another, expected “national parity” to be upheld in leadership and resource-distribution structures. To be sure, there were exceptions and local variations, but arguably one of the Soviet Union’s most consequential legacies in Dagestan was the normalization of national identity as a taken-for-granted, unproblematic backdrop to everyday institutional and social life.

Then came Perestroika, and ideas that had previously circulated only behind the scenes began to surface and institutionalize in a formal manner. Across the rest of the USSR, various public organizations emerged—including those organized along national lines. In Dagestan, the central point of contention was the “land issue,” particularly in connection with the resettlements described earlier. This issue, however, was increasingly interpreted in explicitly national terms. It was not framed as “Mountain populations have resettled to the plains,” but rather as “Avars came down from the mountains, invaded, and took over our—Kumyk—land.” This ethnicized framing was actively cultivated by national organizations. For example, the Kumyk organization *Tenglik* lobbied for the “return of Kumyk land to the Kumyks.” It was met with competition from a range of similar organizations representing other groups, which in turn put forward claims to advance the interests of “mountain” nationalities. These organizations did not always share the same objectives. In particular, the Lak movement focused on the relocation of the Novolak area from the vicinity of Khasavyurt to a different site on the plains—a goal that it largely succeeded in achieving. This initiative was driven by two main factors: first, the Khasavyurt–Novolak area experienced a mass return of deported Chechens, leading to considerable overcrowding; second, there was little serious consideration of a return to the mountainous homeland as a viable option. These movements, which began in the late 1980s, became fully institutionalized over the course of the 1990s, marking yet another—and arguably one of the most distinctive—chapters in the history of nationalities in Dagestan.

The thing is, with Soviet institutions withdrawing from the region and new Russian ones failing to take root quickly enough, Dagestani elites undertook the task of constructing their own political institutions. These were grounded in the previously informal—yet widely recognized—principle of national representation. According to the 1994 Constitution, the head of the Republic was the State Council, composed of 14 members. This number corresponded to the “main,” officially recognized nationalities, and no more than one representative of each nationality could sit on the Council at any given time. Moreover, the Chair of the State Council (technically, the President of the Republic) was to be re-elected every two years (the Council itself was elected every four), and each successive chair had to belong to a different nationality than his predecessor. A similar regulatory logic was applied to the National Assembly (the legislative body), where the distribution

of seats was formally tied to the proportional representation of nationalities within the Republic's population. This system was partially implemented through the creation of "national" electoral districts. As a result, the first and second convocations of the Assembly closely mirrored the ethnic composition of the population, with a maximum deviation of only 2% from official statistics. A comparable electoral principle was introduced in polyethnic regions and municipalities, though with less success. These institutional arrangements contributed to a renewed "revitalization" of the still quite vivid and functional classification of nationalities in the minds of the population. To borrow William Thomas's formulation: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences"—but the reverse also holds true: situations that generate real consequences come to be perceived as real. The degree to which the nationalities reinvigorated by the public political life of the 1990s "were real" had likely never been higher.

Thus, the proliferation of nationalities in Dagestan was rooted in the political processes of the 1980s and 1990s, which built upon—and extended—seven decades of administrative and everyday "naturalization" of national categories under the Soviet regime. However, signs of decline, along with their underlying causes, soon began to emerge. In 2006, the Republic was compelled to abandon the political institutions described above: the broader unification of regional laws across the Russian Federation rendered the "national" requirements for candidates to the State Council unconstitutional.

Simultaneously, three additional processes unfolded, each contributing to the further destabilization of nationality-based everyday reality: urban modernization, Islamization, and translocal practices. Prior to the dissolution of the USSR, Makhachkala—the capital of Dagestan—was predominantly a "Russian" city. In the 1990s, however, the outmigration of the Russian population was swiftly followed by an influx of villagers and highlanders. Initially, insofar as this demographic shift coincided with the institutionalization of nationalities (and in line with the "Manchester school" logic mentioned earlier), ethnic categories were used by the new urban residents both as a regulator of interpersonal relations and as a framework for interpreting perceived cultural differences. Over time, however, the Makhachkala agglomeration—and other cities in the Republic—began to develop an urban culture that effectively "melted down" those differences, whether linguistic, economic, or otherwise. As a result, the idea that nationalities correspond to distinct cultural modes gradually lost its salience. One important contributing factor was the adoption of Russian as the city's *lingua franca*, which increasingly became the mother tongue of first-generation urban dwellers. As urban culture took shape and the Russian language replaced ancestral mother tongues⁴, a new perception emerged: the domain of the "national" came to be

⁴ Note that by force of administrative momentum, the "mother tongue" in Dagestan is generally interpreted as the language of a person's nominal nationality even though they might not know it to any degree.

associated with the villages and mountains, while in the cities, nationality became a largely nominal or symbolic affiliation—something everyone possessed, but which no longer carried practical significance.

At the same time, a process of Islamization was underway. While Dagestan had never been fully secular during Soviet times—Islam remained a cultural component, intertwined in complex ways with highland non-Islamic traditions and the patterns of Soviet everyday life—the 1990s witnessed the emergence of a “modern” Islam that was considerably more demanding in its influence over daily practices, effectively “binding” everyday life to a comprehensive religious normative system. Within this framework, any form of division within the *ummah* (the global Muslim community) is discouraged—even if such division does not entail explicit hostility toward members of other categories. It was in this context, and within these increasingly expansive social circles, that the reality of Soviet nationalities was either actively rejected or simply ceased to be reinforced.

The final simultaneous development was a marked intensification of migration—both out of Dagestan and out of Russia more broadly—when compared to the Soviet period. Outside the Republic, Dagestanis began to integrate into existing local classification systems: as “Dagestanis” or “Caucasians” within other regions of Russia, and as “Russians” when abroad. These external categories gradually filtered back into the Republic through a range of translocal practices—return visits, phone calls, internet communication with friends and relatives, and so on. In doing so, they relativized the internal nationality-based classifications, contributing to their progressive erosion and rendering them increasingly irrelevant within everyday life in Dagestan.

Perhaps there are additional mechanisms that have contributed to the declining significance of nationalities in Dagestan. One such factor is the shift in the mode of selecting the Head of the Republic: the position ceased to be filled through popular election and became a federally appointed role—an indication of the increasing involvement of the federal center in local political affairs. This change placed the established consociational system of position distribution under strain. Destabilized “from the top down,” the system proved unable to recalibrate “from the bottom up.” At the same time, the notion that political representation should, in certain contexts, correspond to national affiliation has not disappeared. “National” arguments remain salient in specific political interactions, suggesting that nationalities continue to exercise a regulatory function—one that still resonates in other spheres of life, at least to a degree.

If we consider all the ways in which Soviet nationalities manifested in everyday life—through passports, regulation of marital behavior, political representation, or spontaneous categorization in daily interactions—it becomes evident that their significance is in decline. It is now possible to argue that, as a classificatory framework, nationalities have been “digested”: they emerged, enjoyed a

period of relevance, and are now gradually fading from everyday consciousness. This entire cycle has unfolded over the course of roughly a century and a half—a relatively brief span in historical terms. And yet, both this period itself and the role nationalities played in shaping the lives of Dagestanis across it can be studied in their entirety, especially given that national categories have not disappeared altogether. The story of “the birth, life, and death of Soviet Dagestani nationalities” can, in fact, be told.

This line of inquiry has been applied only rarely to the study of Soviet nationalities in Dagestan. As such, this essay should not be read as a definitive account, but rather as an extended hypothesis—a conceptual proposal for future research. The research in question is not the product of a single, modest field trip (with which this paper is associated), but rather the outline of a long-term project: one that could span several years or even decades of sustained, intensive inquiry. The effort is worth undertaking. Its results would yield a full account of the “lifespan” of an ethnic categorization—from its initial formation to its eventual obsolescence—and contribute significantly to the contemporary study of ethnicity as a phenomenon of categorization. Full speed ahead!

This essay was originally created as supplementary material during the preparatory phase of a field trip conducted in the summer of 2024. While the main body of the text remains largely unchanged, it seems important to append a postscript reflecting the findings of that fieldwork. According to the results—alongside the methodological reflections presented in the corresponding publication—although nationalities are indeed becoming less salient, the process is neither rapid nor uniform. The mechanisms of decline described earlier are primarily characteristic of polyethnic urban contexts, particularly Makhachkala, where national categories are indeed losing their function as effective frameworks of social classification.

There are, however, still contexts in which nationalities continue to structure social life, with a range of social and cognitive “pragmatics” remaining relevant—or even newly emerging. That said, and this applies to Dagestan as a whole, the persistence of national categories is largely a result of their ongoing reproduction through documentation, statistics, and verbal and visual representations. It is precisely this continued reproduction that delays the “death” of Dagestani nationalities as a classificatory framework. How do nationalities function in the present day, and how have their “pragmatics” evolved over time? These are the questions that future research must address.