In conclusion, the collected articles in this work make an important contribution to the growing literature on the history of Russian and Ukrainian women. It will be of interest to students and specialists in Russian, Ukrainian and women's studies, as well as historians, political scientists, sociologists and economists.

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This collection of eight well-documented and competently organized essays describes how the deconstruction of political myths underpinning Soviet "federal colonialism" opened the gates to competing discourses and new mythologies of ethnogenesis in what became the Newly Independent States. The contributors represent different disciplines, including geography, linguistics, political science, history, and ethnography. The case studies cover – to a widely varying extent – Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

The main theoretical theme of this volume is that nations are reified myths and, hence, nationalizing projects in the former Soviet borderlands represent battles for reification among myths of ethnogenesis, identity and homeland (Smith, chapter 1). These myths represent three types of political discourses (core nation, multiculturalist, and neo-Soviet). Within case studies, this typology branches out widely. Wilson (chapter 2) in his comparison of Ukraine and Belarus distinguishes between anti-colonial myths of the borderlands (such as "Golden Age," national character, suffering, national resistance, and revival) and the unifying myths of the center (such as common origin, forced separation, voluntary reunion, and common endeavor). In a study of nation building in Georgia, Law (chapter 8) distinguishes between language myths that are either extrinsic (emphasize origin and destiny) or intrinsic (emphasize lexical resources and style).

Since nation building is a politicized competition among malleable mythological discourses, the crucial question in nationalizing projects in the NIS is which myths and why get reified. The book does a good job descriptively addressing the "which" part of this question, leaving the "why" part addressed rather sketchily (although, in defense of the editors, addressing the "why" was not among the key stated goals of this project).

The volume offers, albeit tentatively, a major theoretical insight on the evolution of ethnic politics under institutional transformation. The availability, plausibility, and popularity among the public of nationalist myths structure incentives for ethnopolitical behavior in very much the same manner as political institutions structure incentives for economic behavior of individuals and firms. It follows also that, apart from the constructivist skills of nationalizing elites, nationalizing mythology must have some intrinsic properties that affect ethnopolitical outcomes systematically. This
should be especially the case when formal political institutions collapse rapidly, as happened in the former Soviet Union.

Advancing this theory beyond a general outline, however, is problematic. It is hard to grade the nationalizing myths on the basis of historical plausibility, and it is even harder to make connections between the estimated plausibility of myths and political outcomes resulting from nationalizing projects. Nationalizing elites in the former Soviet Union created many an outlandish myth setting the stage for interethnic disputes. According to these claims, for example, Ukrainians were the first to domesticate the horse circa 4000 BC, Belarusians won the Battle of Grunwald (1410), Armenians invented the world’s first alphabet, Azerbaijanis gave rise to “proto-Turkic ethnos,” Georgians (or Abkhazians) started the Iron Age; and Ossetia was the Biblical location where Jesus Christ (himself an Ossetian along with eleven apostles) learned the wisdom of sacrifice. Yet, the ethnopolitical outcomes resulting from these new mythologies of ethnogenesis have been very different: bloody wars in Georgia and Azerbaijan contrast sharply with bloodless disputes between Ukraine and Russia.

Moreover, at the theoretical level the studies show just how hard it is to disentangle essentialist myths, political constructions, and rational calculation when it comes to the politics of national identity. While concentrating on myths and discourses, the authors inevitably emphasize a host of exogenous factors underlying political reification of these myths and discourses. First, discourses appear to be secondary to exogenous political motivations of elites. Thus, as Allworth (chapter 4) shows, Uzbekistan’s leaders sacralized Amir Temur (Tamerlaine, d. 1405) as a symbol of a successful and non-communist iron-hand rule outside of Moscow’s control. Shaybaniy Khan (d. 1510) and his Uzbek dynasty failed to become new iconic figures despite the ethnic factor, because their authoritarianism was not as successful and internationally renowned as Temur’s.

Second, the severity of conflict resulting from clashing identity discourses appears to be a function of the security dilemma, as Shnirelman’s analysis of violent conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia implies. It is precisely the security dilemma, rather than the intrinsic quality of myths that gives rise to “incommensurable versions of history” that “clash with each other as if they were primordial shibboleths.” (pp. 49-50). Third, construction of identities appears to be significantly influenced by availability of economic resources and bureaucratic expediency. Despite imposing legal barriers to citizenship for ethnic Russians, the governments of Estonia and Latvia granted exemptions to people deemed to have provided “special” (Estonia) or “outstanding” (Latvia) services to the state (p. 113). In 1996, the government of Uzbekistan changed its 1989 law on languages, extending the mandatory change from Cyrillic to Latin script by five years, from 2000 to 2005.

Fourth, Smith (chapter 5) asks if myth and discourse creation is a function of rational choices and the logic of collective action. Smith’s analysis — perhaps contrary to the author’s intent — suggests that rationality plays a powerful role in nationalizing projects. In the Baltic States, for example, these projects appear to have served the economic interests of the titular ethnic groups, who then sought to institutionalize and reproduce ethnic and linguistic differences.