Introduction

Ethnic activism has emerged as one of the most difficult challenges for the USSR in the Gorbachev era. From the Baltic republics to the Caucasus and Central Asia, the scope and intensity of ethnic activism, along with the diversity of the issues raised, came as something of a surprise both for Soviet leaders in Moscow and observers of Soviet politics in the West. Western analysts of the Soviet ethnic politics have traditionally focused on the changing nuances of meaning articulated in party ideological tracts and nationalities policy, but reliance on official political discourse has willy-nilly been considerably discredited as a barometer of the diverse social and political interests emerging in the USSR's multinational society. In the not too distant past, the legitimate issues of ethnic politics were largely defined by this official discourse that tended to concentrate its attention on relations between the center and the republics and between the dominant Russian population and the rest of the country's ethnic communities. Now, it is ethnic activism itself, as diverse as the ethnic communities in which it is based, that has increasingly come to define the issues on the USSR's ethnic political agenda.

The overt articulation of ethnic political interests in political rhetoric was constrained by a formulaic obeisance to the ideological tenets of a "new historical community, the Soviet people" and the "friendship of peoples," but other fields provided more open and flexible forums for the elaboration of ethnic interests. One of these realms was that of culture, the products of literary, artistic, and other intellectual endeavors. Indeed, some of the major trends in ethnic culture of the post-Stalin period prefigured the contours of ethnic politics in the Gorbachev era. The themes of yesterday's ethnic culture have often emerged as the issues of today's ethnic activism. Thus, the obsolete notion that culture in the USSR is a passive victim of state policy

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needs to be replaced with a view of culture as an active participant in the
definition of social interests and the formation of political agendas.

The emergence of public protests and conflict over Karabakh, a predominantly Armenian enclave in the Azerbaijani republic, not only rattled political stability in the Caucasian republics, it also raised the issue of the rights of ethnic minorities outside their home republics to the all-Union level. But the Karabakh conflict and the tragic violence that it continues to produce are best understood in this broader context of the increasingly vocal assertion of political and cultural rights for ethnic populations without administrative autonomy. This article examines the cultural origins of this dimension of ethnic activism among the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis. It reviews the ways in which Stalinist policies shaped the construction and reconstruction of ethnic identity and the changes that representations of ethnic identity underwent in the post-Stalin period. In this process of nation-building, culture, especially national literatures and historiographies, has served to legitimate the changing conceptions of ethnic identity. But the production of culture does not proceed independently of politics and institutions. Institutions do not unilaterally determine the forms and contents of culture, but the novel forms of political organization brought by Soviet rule in the Caucasian republics established a new context for both cultural activity and ethnic politics in the USSR.

Stalin Answers the National Question: National-State Construction

One of the crucial issues facing the young Soviet government was the development of new forms of political organization for the country's multi-ethnic population. Early Soviet policies concerned with state formation were decisively influenced by Joseph Stalin's 1913 article "Marxism and the National Question." The core of this article is Stalin's definition of a nation: "A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture." 1

Stalin's definition of a nation has elicited much debate and criticism, but one of the points least discussed is his inclusion of territory as an attribute of the nation. 2 The salience of the territorial dimension to Stalin's understanding of nationality is reflected in the text of the article itself, which reads like an extended polemic against Austro-Marxist theories of the national question that identify national rights with the ethnic community, or