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INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN THE SOVIET STATE: MANIFESTATIONS, INSTITUTIONAL CAUSES, AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

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1. Introduction

The structural stability of the Soviet Union was long predicated on the ideological myth of druzhba narodov (the friendship of peoples) and the deliberate engineering of a unified Homo Sovieticus. However, underneath the monolithic facade of totalitarian integration lay deeply entrenched ethnic and territorial grievances. The Bolshevik nationalities policy, initially designed to neutralize local nationalisms through the policy of korenizatsiya (indigenization), paradoxically institutionalized ethnicity by anchoring it to specific administrative territories. This study addresses the critical historical question: how did the institutional mechanisms of the Soviet state inadvertently foster the conditions for violent inter-ethnic conflicts? By examining the socio-political trajectories of ethnic friction—climaxing in the cataclysmic events of the late 1980s—this paper analyzes the systemic causes and enduring regional consequences of the collapse of the Soviet nationalities policy, with a particular focus on the Central Asian context.

2. Methods

This research utilizes a multi-disciplinary approach rooted in the **historical-comparative method** and **archival analysis**. By cross-referencing declassified Soviet administrative records, census data from 1926 to 1989, and contemporary historiographical accounts, the study reconstructs the socio-economic and demographic shifts that preceded ethnic mobilizations. The theoretical architecture of this paper relies on **constructivist theories of nationalism** (specifically Rogers Brubaker’s concept of institutionalized ethnicity), which argue that the Soviet state did not suppress nations but actively constituted them as institutional and political realities. This framework is applied to examine the structural friction points created by national-territorial delimitation (razmezhevanie) and the propiska (residency permit) system.

3. Results

The empirical findings of this research demonstrate that Soviet state policies acted as a primary catalyst for ethnic polarization in three distinct phases:

The Legacy of Territorial and Demographic Engineering: The 1924 national-territorial delimitation in Central Asia drew borders that intentionally disregarded organic economic and ethnic topographies, creating complex enclaves and artificial majorities. This was severely compounded by the forced deportations of the 1940s (e.g., Meskhetian Turks, Crimean Tatars, Chechens), which structurally altered the demographic balance of host republics like Uzbekistan.

Institutionalized Competition and Economic Grievances: The Soviet command economy enforced a rigid monoculture of cotton in Uzbekistan, leading to severe ecological degradation, water scarcity (the Aral Sea crisis), and rural overpopulation. The late-Soviet economic stagnation minimized federal resource allocation, turning ethnic boundaries into frontiers for intense competition over scarce land and water resources.

The Catalyst of Perestroika and the "Cotton Affair": Mikhail Gorbachev's liberalization policies (Glasnost) allowed long-suppressed grievances to surface. Concurrently, the Moscow-led anti-corruption campaign known as the "Cotton Affair" (Paxta ishi) purged the Uzbek political elite, which

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was perceived locally as a colonial assault on national dignity. This political decapitation weakened local state authority, transforming socio-economic despair into ethnic violence, most notably manifested in the **1989 Fergana Valley pogroms** against Meskhetian Turks.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The tragic explosions of violence during the Perestroika era—ranging from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to the Fergana crises—were not spontaneous anomalies but the logical culmination of structural contradictions built into the Soviet federal system. When the centralized coercion apparatus of the KGB and the Communist Party weakened, the artificial state-imposed identity rapidly dissolved, revealing robust, historically grounded national consciousnesses.

The socio-political consequences of these manifested conflicts directly accelerated the geopolitical collapse of the USSR in 1991. Ultimately, the failure of the Soviet nationalities policy underscores that top-down ideological engineering cannot permanently erase organic ethnic identities. The contemporary security architecture of Central Asia, characterized by unresolved border disputes, enclave management crises, and transboundary water conflicts (such as periodic clashes in the Vorukh and Fergana border zones), remains heavily path-dependent on these historical Soviet structural legacies.

5. Theoretical Implications and Novelty

This study contributes to the broader historiographical and sociological debate on empire-building and dissolution. While classical Sovietology often viewed the USSR as a traditional melting pot that successfully integrated disparate nationalities through modernization, this research aligns with the "subversive empire" paradigm. It argues that the Soviet state was inherently auto-destructive: by creating distinct national territories, local language policies, and institutionalized ethnic identities, the regime provided the exact organizational frameworks and political vocabulary that local elites used to mobilize against the center during the crisis of late socialism. The novelty of this research lies in its synthesis of macro-level institutional policies with micro-level socio-economic grievances (such as the cotton monoculture and ecological collapse in the Uzbek SSR), demonstrating that ethnic violence was driven by material and structural desperation rather than ancient primordial hatreds.

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