CHAPTER THREE
LANGUAGE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ETHNOGENETIC MYTHS IN THE SOVIET UNION

Using a Marxist approach for the examination of historical sources, the [Soviet] historical science establishes the only truth, which may correspond to none of the known sources
Tamaz Natroshvili, *The Knight of the Truth*

The main objective of this Chapter is to show the actual process of creation, maintenance, and dissemination of ethnogenetic myths that could be used in the process of ethnic enclosure. We will place particular attention to the role of intellectuals in this process as well as examine how the teaching of local histories in Soviet autonomies facilitated the spread of ethnocentric myths

3.1. HISTORIANS AND THE PROCESS OF MYTHS FORMATION IN THE USSR

During the Soviet era, one of the most important means of preserving the privileged position of an ethnic group was to establish a separate and lasting identity of the group, and three criteria – territory (or homeland), statehood, and language/religion – were employed. Thus, the history of the ethnic groups, especially its ethnogenesis, became an important political issue, and the past acquired great political significance. For this purpose, the political leadership sometimes went so far as to order scholars to write a new history (meaning *rewriting* history) of the ethnic group. In this environment, historians felt under the enormous pressure and, often, a scholar’s academic and secular future depended upon his or her efforts to establish the separate and continued identity of his or her own ethnic group (see, e.g., Shnirelman 2003, 20-22).

The role of intellectuals in nationalist movements and the use of scientific knowledge in nationalist discourses have been key subjects of research in academic literature on ethnicity and nationalism for quite a long time. However, we believe it is best to start our examination of the impact of the work of intellectuals on the ethnic and language policies in the Soviet Union in this Chapter with the discussion of theoretical framework proposed by Miroslav Hroch in his review of the contribution of intellectuals to the process of nationalist mobilization (Hroch 1985). That is because the methodological approach chosen by Hroch for a comparative analysis of the social
preconditions of national revival’, namely, to make a ‘comparison [of the growth of nationalist movements] on the basis of analogous historical situations’ (Hroch 1985, 21) and to place emphasis on the identification of the common and distinctive features of the process seems to be in line with the objectives set out for our own research. Hroch considers a nation “large social group defined by a combination of various types of relations … a group with a given historical origin, of people who only gradually attained to national consciousness under the influence of objective circumstances” (Hroch 1985, 22) and he focuses on the examination of such criteria as quantitative growth of national activity, the social impact of the impulses emerging from national agitation, the forms of agitation and the ideas on which a national program is based, in order to clarify the role of nationalist movements in historical development of a nation. As we will see in the following Chapters, in the Caucasus – similarly to the cases described by Hroch – the process of ‘national revival’ of ethnic groups in the end of the 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th century was marked by the same characteristics of the developing of interest of local intellectuals to study indigenous languages, culture and history as Hroch identifies when he explains historical and political background of the spread of nationalist movements in Eastern Europe. Therefore, the concept of nationalist mobilization offered by Hroch is of particular relevance for the evaluation of the role intellectuals played in the construction of ethnogenetic myths in the South Caucasus.

There are several interesting findings in the Hroch’s examination of nationalism. Firstly, Hroch shows that the specifics of the distribution of nationalist activities in ‘smaller nations’ (Hroch 1985, 163-174): it turned out that the areas of strong nationalist activities corresponded not so much to some existing administrative or language boundaries or the level of ethnic homogeneity but to the areas with a more developed educational network. Second, the largest group of patriots was composed by intellectuals. Third, the results obtained by Hroch showed that it is not so much the process of industrialization per se, which causes the emergence of nationalist movements, but it is a new character of the societal relations that has appeared along the process of industrialization. Fourth, Hroch focused his investigation at the ‘revival of small nations in Europe’. He argues that there is an important distinction between the
dominant (or “large”) and non-dominant (“small”) nations.

According to Hroch, it is possible to differentiate three discrete stages (“phases”) in the development of a nationalist commitment (see Table 3.1). During Phase A, there is only a small group of intellectuals who elaborate the notion of nation. Next, during Phase B, the patriotic networks grow and are used to spread out patriotic ideas by means of intensive agitation. Then, finally, during Phase C, a serious social mobilization begins (Hroch1985, 23-24). The patterns of the ethno-nationalist process in the South Caucasus, in particular that of Abkhazians and Ossetians, to a large extend corresponded to those Hroch described on the examples of Norwegians, Czechs, Finns, Estonians, Lithuanians, Flemings, Danes and Slovaks.

Table 3.1 Stages of the Growth of Nationalist Commitment
(adapted from Hroch 1985, 23-28)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase A</td>
<td>“The period of scholarly interest” (study of language, history and culture of ethnic group leads a small group of intellectuals to the elaboration of the notion of nation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase B</td>
<td>“The period of patriotic agitation” (the patriotic networks grow and are used to spread out patriotic ideas by means of intensive agitation; a concept of nationalism is elaborated as a political program)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase C</td>
<td>“The rise of a mass national movement” (a significant national mobilization begins, the doctrine elaborated during Phase B is widely accepted by masses)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main objective of Hroch’s approach was to show how the character of nationalism is shaped by timing of each of the phases in relation to other social transformations, especially economic changes. For the purposes of our own research, however, the most important point of Hroch’s explanation is that he demonstrates the historical rise of nationalism as an evolutionary process, in which intellectuals translate their scientific knowledge into a public discourses. During this process, the role of intellectuals is not limited by the task to evoke and reconstruct the ethnic group’s past and to root it in a historic tradition. In other words, the work of intellectuals inevitably leads to the formation and strengthening of a myth of ethnogenesis, which can be understood as a set of beliefs held by an ethnic group about the historical development
Myth is one of the key terms that can be found in contemporary academic literature dealing with the issues of nationalism and ethnicity. That is because even in those cases where the myth is an apparently irrational and false construction, the examination of the myth’s content provides an opportunity for understanding the worldview of the group in question (Overing 1997, 1-5). The evaluation of myths can be, thus, central to the study of politics, and, following George Schopflin (1997, 22-27), it is possible to identify several key functions of ethnogenetic myths as regards the importance of myths in the political realms of an ethnic community. One of the most key functions of myths in political realm is that myths attribute special qualities to a social group, extends its distinctiveness and establishes certain boundaries based on a particular worldview of the group reflected by the myth. In relation to this, myth can be exploited as an instrument of an identity transfer.

In case a myth of assimilation is put into action by an ethnic group in a possession of a well-established myth of ethnogenesis, it may cause the abandonment of culture, language and myth-world of a ‘myth-poor’ ethnic community in exchange for a higher and more attractive values attributive to a ‘superior’ ethnic group. Further on, myths can be skillfully exploited by political leaders so as to provide an illusion of a community. This is especially important in those cases when the group is deemed to be a unified ethnic community but in reality there is a gap – either cultural, religious or linguistic – between segments of the population. That is because the key political function of a myth can be seen as its role in the dissemination of messages sent by the authorities much easier and enhancing the sense of solidarity among all members of the ethnic group in question. Of course, by the same token, myths can be used in order to make ethnic boundaries sharp and to exclude a part of the group from sharing the same ethnic heritage as the rest of its members. This may lead to the creation of the image of ‘other’ and, sometimes, result in the formation of a perception of the excluded part of the group as ‘enemies’. Here, two questions inevitably come to the fore. How such myths are formed and what is the process in the course of which myths are selected and distributed?
Before attempting to answer the questions posed above, it is necessary to underline that, in addition to a diversity of functions of myths, myths also can be differentiated by the key ideas they imply. It is clear that, for instance, the way myths of rebirth and renewal have been formed and maintained must differ from the process involving the construction of myths of military valor. Thus, we will narrow down the task and limit our analysis by the production of myths of ethnogenesis because the appearance and dissemination of such myths can be successfully linked to the scheme proposed by Hroch and his explanations of the importance of the role of intellectuals in the growth of nationalist movement.

A myth of ethnogenesis always involves the discussion of the historical roots of the ethnic group in question, and – in order to be successfully sustained in modern times – ultimately requires the input of intellectuals, because it is intellectuals who supply necessary evidences to support the stand of ethnic group as regards its past. For Hroch, there were little difficulties in answering the question of who should be considered intellectuals for the purposes of the empirical illustration of his approach: an intellectual is anyone who lives off the intellectual labor, i.e. belongs to intelligentsia – the intermediate layer between the masses and elites (university’s professors, writers, journalists, school teachers, local educational authorities, priests, etc.; Hroch 1985, 66). At the same time, as Bruno Coppeters correctly noted, when we examine the links between the work of intellectuals and the growth of a nationalist movement, it is pivotal not to underestimate the country-specific factors that shape the involvement of intellectuals in the process (Coppeters 2002, 15-20). Usually, it is presumed that scholars are taking responsibility for determining the nature and identity of one or another academic discipline, and the methods and objectives of scientific inquiry. On the other hand, in some situations, the authorities actively participate in the development of specific areas of scholarship. If this is the case, then intellectuals may not be the only actors who determine the development of their field of academic knowledge, for the priorities of research activities are often set by the political leadership. Still, scholars hold a ‘near-monopoly over definitions of what constitutes scientific knowledge and how it is to be formulated. This situation gives [them] not only a privileged position of
authority, but also power. They regard themselves, and are perceived by others, as experts who possess a certain cultural capital which is sought out by political and social agents as well as by public at large (Coppieters 2002, 21). Therefore, while the general public is normally aware only of simplified or popularized versions of social knowledge, scholars are closely involved in the process of formulating and interpreting the core ideas related to the past, present and the future of the group. This is how the results of the work conducted by scholars can make a significant impact on the political environment even when there is a high degree of the authorities’ involvement in the process of academic research.

In the Soviet Union, following the Marxist-Leninist tradition, there was no clear distinction between humanities and social sciences, and, as we saw in Chapter Two, many fields of science such as ethnography and linguistics were highly politicized. Yet, the Soviet authorities regarded the exercising of the profession of historian as the only true scientific approach for understanding social change and the authorities set a very extensive agenda for historical research. Not surprisingly, when in the end of the 1980s – beginning of the 1990s, the examination of historiographic discourses in the Soviet Union became the focus of attention for many scholars of ethnicity and nationalism, it was perceived that historians should share responsibility with ethnic leaders for the strengthening of extreme ethnocentric views amongst their respective ethnic groups, and the following figurative comparison made by Erick Hobsbawm was often cited: “…historians are to nationalism what poppy growers in Pakistan are to heroin addicts: we supply the essential raw material for the market” (Hobsbawm 1992, 3).

In its essence, ethnocentric historical narratives produced by historians in Soviet autonomies differed little from similar versions constructed elsewhere since the versions of history of ethnic groups always represent a ‘vision of ethnic fraternity of elites and masses through a historical drama’, which evoke ‘deeper meanings of collective destiny and community in the face of the dangerous fragmentation and alienation that modern industrialism and science unfold’ (Smith 1986, 173). At the same time, the Soviet political environment was indeed conducive to the establishing of quite specific ‘rules of the game’ in the academic community of Soviet historians. According
to the political settings in the USSR, the institutional arrangements were designed in such a way that to ensure a high degree of closeness between historians and ethnic leadership. The Soviet authorities created an effective system of control over the production of history knowledge, which included strict censorship of the administration and local party committees. For example, before permission for printing could be obtained, any manuscript had to be approved at various levels of administrative control both within a research institution and within an editorial house as well. The manuscript was the subject of not so much academic scrutiny as the testing on the meeting the requirements set out by the political leadership. Moreover, the authorities not only exercised a high degree of control over the interpretation of the final results of historical research but also determined the general political and ideological principles that historians were expected to follow (Heer 1973, Heller and Nekrich 1986). Here, it is possible to see the correlates with the framework offered by Hroch: Soviet historians acted both as producers of scholarly knowledge (Phase A) and as those who actively propagated myths (Phase B) by “translat[ing] the idealized images of ethnic past into tactile realities, according to modern canons of knowledge” (Smith 1983, 180).

The link between the academic work on the issues of local history and the status struggle of ethnic groups was another specific characteristic of historical research conducted in Soviet autonomies, since historical knowledge was mobilized in order to justify the rights of the competing ethnic groups following the Soviet dogma. The latter – similarly to the case with the language policy examined in Chapter Two – required that any privileges in the Soviet Union could be granted only to the authentic ethnic groups that are autochthonous to the Soviet territory. Thus, history as a field of science was very closely linked to the processes that led to the maintenance of a high degree of ethnic awareness and, consequently, to the strengthening of ethnic identity of the population in the territory in question.

The importance of the work of historians in relations to the construction of myth can be easily explained by the fact that myths of ethnogenesis are never freely invented or imagined. Of course, the simplification of reality is a precondition for making the exposure of a significant part of ethnic group to the ethnogenetic myth
possible, and, consequently, to facilitate the process of ethno-nationalist mobilization. Even in those cases, where myths are actively exploited in order to enable a shift of identities or to create a new identity, they must have a link to the collective memory of the group in question, and purely invented or falsified versions rarely helped to reach the objectives of the political leaders (Shnirelman 2003, 13-14). The function of historiography is different. Historians are called upon as professionals who are capable of providing necessary historical argumentation enabling to shape the ethnic identity of a group in the required way. A peculiar feature of the work of indigenous historians in the Soviet Union in this respect was the requirement to construct such version of history of an ethnic group that would be deemed appropriate to fulfill the objectives of a political agenda set by the ethnic leadership in Soviet autonomies, namely, to maintain or upgrade the status of autonomy. This task was particularly difficult to achieve in those geographically adjacent territories, which before the establishment of the Soviet power, had been in long rivalry or enmity.

For indigenous historians in the Soviet Union, the efforts of ethnogenetic myth production usually would begin with the establishment of the historic ethnic boundaries, or homeland. In this process, earlier migratory theories would be replaced by autochthonous theories (Shnirelman 2003, 510-513). As it will become clear from our examination of the Caucasian cases, the scholars were trying their best in order to demonstrate “scientifically” that their own ethnic group was the earliest inhabitant, i.e. autochthonous to the territory in question. At the same time, the rival ethnic group or groups would be downgraded to the status of late comers or immigrants. However, when the use of the first-settlers principle alone was not enough, the scholars were trying to demonstrate that their distant ancestors had been more civilized and advanced than their rival neighbors: for example, that their ancestors were “the earliest civilized center of the humankind”. The demonstration was based on the evidences of the formation of urbanized settlements and ancient states (usually in the form of a kingdom) by their own ethnic group, and, sometimes, linguistic assimilation of neighboring groups. As we will see from our examination of the historical narratives produced by historians in the South Caucasus, important sets of evidences or sources (especially when they were contradictory) were often completely ignored in these efforts. Moreover,
the scarcity of reliable evidences allowed very wide latitude of interpretation and speculation, and these images of the past did not necessarily correspond to all the historical evidences available.

As we showed in Chapter Two, the ethnic identity in the Soviet Union was the only permanent, unchangeable, criterion of identity and ethnic distinctiveness was established though language identification. In addition, in order to be identified as an authentic ethnic group, and, therefore, acquire the right for privileges associated with this, a group in question was supposed to maintain their original ‘native language’. That is why, except Russians, all ethnic groups had to struggle for conservation and survival of their ascribed ‘native language’. Those who failed to prove the uniqueness of their language usually would face a lower status. At the same time, all ethnic groups had to demonstrate that they had continued to use their distinct language from the very beginning of the existence as an ethnic group. For this reason, the ethnic groups (and especially their historians) had to try their best to search in the distant past for the evidences of the continuity of their ascribed language in a particular territory. If a specific language has continued to be used from very early times, the continued use of the language or the language itself became a primordial property, i.e. a property unchanged throughout history. An ethnic group aspiring to a higher status in the Soviet Union had to be able to claim that it had continued to use their own language from centuries past, ideally from the time of their origin. In this way, the issue of ethnogenesis was inseparably intertwined with the issue of language. In other words, a successful combination of the postulate of the continuous use of language with the first-settlers principle was required. In sum, ethnic groups had to show both the current maintenance and the historical continued use of their native language.

It is possible to recognize a strong correlation between language and myth, which is not necessarily adequate from a linguistic perspective, especially, in those cases when the group had experienced a language shift but remained its loyalty to the myth maintained before the shift had occurred. Vivian Law (1998, 167) proposed to characterize such beliefs as language myths understood as widely held views about the origins, history and qualities of a language. Further on, language myths can be divided
into two major sub-groups: language-extrinsic myths – those, which emphasize the extrinsic features such as the origin and destiny of a language, and language-intrinsic myths – those, that focus on the intrinsic features such as purity, elegance, and lexical resources. Law argues that many of the myths arise repeatedly in different language communities and are often redeployed with the express intention of demonstrating the superiority of language of one group over language or languages of the other groups. Indeed, scholars are normally the major contributors to the formation and maintenance of language myths and it is possible to spot out a number of manifestations of the importance attached to language myths in the political realms in many cases of ethnic rivalries in the Soviet Union (see, e.g., Shnirelman 2003, 513-515).

However, indigenous scholars in Soviet autonomies faced a task more difficult than a simple glorifying of the language ascribed to their ethnic group. While language myths certainly constituted a significant part of the world-view of ethnic groups, in the construct of a wider ethnogenetic myth language played an extraordinarily multifaceted role, not lastly because language had to be accommodated within a broader historical framework and with respect to the myth (or myths) held by rival ethnic group or groups. Therefore, when upgrading or maintenance of the ethnic group’s status was needed, it was not a single language myth but a set of historical versions, from which an appropriate one was selected and led to the formation of a new myth of the distant past. This new myth confirmed originality (continuity of use) of the language in question and showed its links to a particular geographic area. Then, the language was ascribed to the ethnic group in question, whose autochthonous status was confirmed through language (see Figure 3.1). It is important to underline here that quite often real linguistic considerations had little to do with the discourse used by politicians who, nevertheless, did appeal for “scientifically proved evidence”. That is because one of the most valuable features of language as a political resource originates in proper nature of language, which allows a wide variety of perception patterns with respect to language identification and differentiation. This enables politicians to use language for the purposes of symbolic differentiation/homogenization.
3.2 CYCLES OF ETHNOGENETIC MYTHS FORMATION IN THE USSR

The above examination of the relations between language and myth construction enables to identify the links between historiography and language politics in the Soviet Union. As we saw in the previous Chapter, the duality of the Soviet approach to language policy was expressed through its bipolarity in the autonomous republics, which meant the co-existence of two contradictory trends – its indigenization (korenizatsia) and internationalization (Russification) thrusts. At the same time, the trends were never in equilibrium, i.e. at one period, indigenization was intensified while internationalization weakened, and vice versa. In the cases of ethnic rivalries in the Soviet territory, the intensification of indigenization trend was often used by the titular ethnic groups of the Union republics in order to advance its linguistic offense against other ethnic group in the area under the titular control. As Rouvinski and Matsuo show (2003, 106-107), it is possible to correlate the shifts in the Soviet language policy with the stages of the process of politicized ethnogenetic mythology formation in the USSR. This, in turn, allows us to show the strategic use of language by ethnic leadership during the course of acquisition / maintenance or attempts to upgrade the autonomous status of ethnic group. These stages can be described as follows (see also Table 3.2).
Table 3.2 Stages of Ethnogenetic Myths Construction in the Soviet Union

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1 (1920s)</th>
<th>Building of early idealized historical versions based on the combination of the postulate of the continuous use of language and first-settlers principle with the simultaneous extensive introduction of local languages in the domains of language use in the territories in question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2 (end of the 1920s to the second part of the 1930s)</td>
<td>Introduction of ‘internationalism’ to Soviet historical science, first clashes of myths produced by indigenous historians of rival ethnic groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 3 (end of the 1930s to the mid-1950s)</td>
<td>Domination of the ethno-genetic myths of the titular ethnic groups of the union republics and the first Russification campaign, which downplayed the role of local non-titular languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 4 (mid-1950s to the end of 1980s)</td>
<td>Appearance of cycles of myths formation, further Russification and the struggle of local ethnic groups to maintain the status of their ascribed language through the ethnic myths</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first stage falls in the period of the 1920s. This phase can be characterized by the struggle of ethnic leaderships to obtain a higher autonomous status, because during this time the politico-administrative structure of the USSR was not firmly established yet. The process was shaped up by building of idealized historical versions that ascribed great doings in the past to a particular ethnic group, sometimes even usurping the other people’s historical past known from ancient written sources. This was an early period in the construction of ethnogenetic myths. As we have shown in the preceding Chapter, during this stage, the emphasis on the developing of local languages was very strong, and new local ethnic elites in autonomies regarded as pivotal the task of promoting the versions of history that would combine the postulate of the continuous use of a “common national language” with respect to the territory in question.

The second stage (end of the 1920s – first pat of the 1930s) can be described as the period of an intensive introduction of Marxism in the Soviet science. Historians were required to adopt the “internationalist approach” to their research. The latter was understood as the study of global universality of the logic of development and was supposed to confirm the inevitability of the coming world unity based on the communist principles. This dogma had swayed the day in the Soviet academic institutions in central Russia. During this period, to study the historical process of one or another ethnic group
separately from the historical process *in toto* meant for a scholar to carry the risk of being accused in “bourgeois nationalist deviation.” One was supposed to conceive ethnogenesis as an endless process of mixture of ethnic groups, which was perceived to lead to a merger of distinct ethnic groups into a ‘uniform historical entity’ following the changes of socio-economic formations. It was during this period when Marr’s doctrine was supported by the Soviet authorities at the highest level.

However, the new approach met a severe resistance from the local indigenous elites (Slezkine 1996, 219-220) and it was not always completely followed by scholars in the autonomies although they had to make necessary corrections in their interpretations of the final versions presented to the general public. The certain degree of ambiguity remained until the second part of the 1930s, when the emphasis in the Soviet language policies shifted towards the Russification, and, subsequently, the change of paradigm in Soviet historiography also took place.

The third stage signified a move to the so-called “all-Soviet nationalism” (Shnirelman 1998a, 69-70), which turned out to be a new version of the Russian chauvinism and which, *prima facie*, seemed to be a blow to regional ethnocentric historical narratives. However, Moscow’s authorities needed a solid historical base for the new Soviet ethno-territorial division. The schools of internationalists were strongly criticized by the authorities, and many scholars who supported the internationalist school were physically eliminated during the Stalin’s terror in the end of the 1930s. Meanwhile, the Russian imperial pre-revolutionary historical tradition was partly rehabilitated and historians in central Russia renewed their search for the historical roots of the Russian people, Russian statehood, and the origins of Slavs. At the same time, these developments were reflected *en situ* by a situation where ethnic leadership of autonomous territories, subordinated to the authorities of titular ethnic group of a union republic, had not only to abandon any hope for the upgrading of the autonomous status for their respective ethnic group but often had to defend the status they had already held from being downgraded. Titular ethnogenetic myths came to dominate. In many regions, the instruction on the languages other than Russian and language of the titular ethnic group of a union republic was prohibited.
The next, fourth stage, begins in the second part of the 1950s, when the existence of two seemingly contradicting approaches in the Soviet historiography, namely, to promote the “all-Soviet nationalism” and ethnocentric, became evident. The authorities in Moscow wanted to restrain the potentially dangerous growth of ethnonationalism by encouraging non-Russian ethnic groups to go ahead with an “advanced program” for its “national development” (Suny 1996, 377-378). Moreover, the ethnogenetic myths constructed in the non-Russian autonomies competed not as much with Russian historical interpretations as with rival versions produced by indigenous scholars of other non-Russian ethnic groups. Therefore, while the focus of language policies was to promote a wider use of the Russian language, language remained closely linked to ethnic identity everywhere in the Soviet Union. Unable to advance in linguistic terms the use of regional languages, ethnic leaders made enormous efforts to promote the production and dissemination of ethnocentric myths, which were based on the combination of the postulate of the continuous use of the language ascribed to their ethnic group and the first-settlers principle. This led to the formation of language-territory complex. As we explained in Chapter One, this complex is viewed as the core of ethnic enclosure. In order to examine in more detail how in the process of ethnic enclosure myths were distributed and maintained among ethnic groups and how myths reinforced language-territory complexes, it is necessary to review the teaching of local histories in schools of Soviet autonomies.

3.3. MYTHS AND TEACHING OF LOCAL HISTORIES IN SCHOOLS OF SOVIET AUTONOMIES

The frequent change of official versions of history of ethnic groups in the Soviet Union can be regarded as one of the most important indicators of the existence of the cycles of ethnogenetic myths formation, explained in the preceding part of this Chapter. Usually, official history is understood as the version of history approved by the authorities. However, even in the USSR, the authorities normally would never explicitly state that one or another version of history is ‘approved’ as an official one. One way of knowing the official version of history is to examine the narratives of school textbooks, which were used to teach local histories in autonomies, since in the Soviet Union the
authorities exercised the total control over the system of education. The comparison of the methods of teaching of all-Union history and local history shows how the ethnic group in question was exposed to myths of ethnogenesis and how the clash of myths made an impact on the perceptions of the importance of language and the knowledge of the distant past for the present and future of ethnic groups.

The teaching of histories other than the history of the USSR and universal history was officially introduced to the school curricula everywhere throughout the Soviet Union, except for schools in the Russian Federation, in the academic year of 1960/61 (Kuzin 1979, 3). However, the actual teaching of local histories in the autonomies started much earlier, in the 1920s-1930s, i.e. in those days when the teaching of history as a school subject common for all Soviet schools was replaced by обществоведние, the Soviet version of civic studies (Social Science in Soviet Secondary Schools… 1966). Students were learning their ethnic histories in the classes of краеведение, or regional studies, and often the material related to the historical development of the area in question was also to be found in geography and literature textbooks. These subjects had been kept in the school curriculum ever since, including the period when history as a subject was rehabilitated in Soviet schools in the second part of the 1930s and the directive of introducing a ‘stable’ (meaning ‘unified’) all-Union history textbook was made known by a 1937 publication in Pravda of a letter signed by Stalin & Co (Bordugov and Bukharev 1999, 36). However, contrary to the story with the textbooks of the history of USSR, when at any given time the students of any school in the Soviet Union used the only version of the textbook approved by the All-Union Ministry of Education and all the textbooks had to be replaced throughout the entire country as soon as a new edition was published (Wertch 2002, 80), the textbooks of regional histories had to be approved by republican or autonomous ministries of education, and the local authorities had a significant degree of freedom in choosing the content of the textbooks1 (Kuzin et al 1979). Often, these textbooks had been published

---

1 This is one of the reasons why the textbooks published locally have different formats: some have maps but others not, some provided students with chronological tables but others not, etc. The polygraphic quality of books also varies greatly. Surprisingly enough (or may be not), it seems that until the middle of the 1970s, there was no any detailed set of directives or rules, approved at an all-union level, on the issue of regional histories, which could be expected in such a highly-centralized structure as the Soviet Union (see, e.g., Marykhuba 1994, 284-285)
in the titular or regional languages but a Russian-language edition was always printed simultaneously or soon after.

The official Moscow’s requirement to the authors of the textbooks on local histories was “to convince students, based on the facts in the republican or local history, that friendship of the peoples of the Soviet Union was forged as far back in history as in times immemorial” (Kuzin et al 1979: 3). However, since the end of the 1930s, i.e. during the period, which corresponds to the Stage 3 in our periodization of the process of ethnogenetic myths formation in the USSR (see Table 3.2), the main concern of the central authorities was to make sure that the textbooks’ narratives emphasize the “unbreakable friendship” of the Russian people and ethnic group in question for many centuries. A few attempts to break the rule were quickly frozen off. As a result of this policy of Moscow, each group wanted to show their higher historical status of the links with Russians. The indigenous authors of the textbooks on republican histories were literally competing with each other in showing whose ethnic group had closer and earlier contacts with Slavs, sometimes ascribing to the former or to the latter or to both such adventures as the achievements of Alexander the Great would simply fade.

On the other hand, the situation with the central control over the picturing of the relations amongst non-Russian ethnic groups in the distant past was quite different. Normally, party offices in the autonomies, regional ministries of education and academies had a quite comfortable field of maneuver, and Moscow usually was reluctant to intervene unless there was a risk of an open protest in relation to the introduction of a new official version of regional history. Moreover, the approach to build the fabula of ethnic histories on the “first-settlers + continuous use of language” principle itself was never questioned. The methodological recommendations for teaching republican histories in the Soviet Union called upon the teachers to use extensively extra-curriculum material and allowed a much greater flexibility of lessons’ planning as well as the curricula design than in the case of teaching a unified all-Union

2 For example, in 1943, the entire print run of History of Kazakh SSR was destroyed in Alma Ata because it had mentioned the tsarist Russia as the major and the most dangerous enemy of Kazakhstan (Bordugov and Bukharev 1999, 52)

3 For instance, the 1950 edition of the textbook on Armenian history has a paragraph dedicated to the “broad links” between medieval Armenia and Kiev Rus (Shnitrelman 2003, 76)
The teachers of non-all-Union histories\textsuperscript{4} had more freedom in choosing the themes and methodology of teaching, selecting questions for examination, etc., in particular, when dealing with the history of the remote past. Even in carefully edited Soviet publications, it is possible to notice some evidences of how different the teaching of supposedly unified republican histories was in various parts of one and the same republic. For example, in Ukraine, Ukrainian history was taught differently in Eastern, Central-Dnieper and Western areas, where, using the Soviet wording, teachers were “trying to reflect on the local specifics through the extensive use of regional extra-curriculum material” (Kuzin et al 1979, 11). The authors of the methodological recommendations for teaching regional (republican, local) histories advised teachers to avoid the duplication of the themes in the course of the all-Union and local histories, notably, when teaching ancient history, which, in practice, often meant the replacement of the themes in the course of the all-Union history by the topics concerned with the history of the distant past of the territory in question. As the author of one of only few reports on these issues published during the Soviet times cautiously acknowledges, “Themes related to regional history prevail” (Kuzin et al 1979, 8-9). Moreover, the teachers of regional history were allowed to allocate twice more time for teaching history of the remote past than it was perceived by the all-Union history curricula (Kuzin et al 1979, 12).

The Soviet methodology of teaching history facilitated an easy absorption of a simplified version of history by the students. Teachers in the Soviet Union were taught that if historical data is clearly presented and concretely discussed, even small children can understand the most complicated generalizations of the historical process: focusing students’ attention on single, important facts or events and making generalizations about the character of certain happenings or developments are some of the common techniques which Soviet history teachers were encouraged to use in the classrooms (Medlin 1960, 107). In the textbooks of the history of the USSR, there was very little information concerning the early developments in the areas outside Russia proper. For example, the Short Course of the history of the USSR published in 1950 (\textit{Kratkii kurs istorii SSSR} 1950), does not mention any significant events in the distant past in the

\textsuperscript{4} Usually, the same people who taught the course of the history of the USSR.
Caucasus. The more recent editions of the all-Union textbooks of the history of the USSR contained more information about ancient history, in particular, they had mentioned the closeness of the Scythians and the Slavs, the importance of the Alan state, and that modern Ossetians are descendents of the inhabitants of the Alan state\textsuperscript{5} (Istoriya SSSR 1985, 10). On the other hand, these textbooks emphasized that in the Transcaucasia smaller states were under the great Georgian influence and eventually became a part of the unified Georgian state\textsuperscript{6}. In the 1985 edition of the textbook of history of the USSR, amongst all other – non-Russian – ethnic groups in the Soviet Union, only Georgians are mentioned as “one of the peoples who created their own alphabet very early” (Istoriya SSSR 1985, 12).

The issue of school graduate examination is worth of mentioning here as well. The lack of a detailed information about the distant past in the textbooks of the history of the USSR did not cause much trouble to students of schools in Soviet autonomies since in the final exams on the all-Union history there were few questions related to these themes: the final state exam in the history of the USSR was devoted almost entirely to subjects of recent Soviet-Russian history and to the official history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (see, for example, Programmy srednei schkoly po istorii sssr 1957, Medlin 1960, 110). However, that was not the case with the exams on republican histories in many schools outside the Russian Federation. Graduates of those schools had to pass the exam, which contained questions concerned with the early history of the territory in question (Kuzin et al 1979, 4), and students were preparing to this exam using the textbooks published locally. These textbooks’ representations of history of the distant past were much less ideologically-driven than the descriptions of the more recent events. Instead, they were almost exclusively ethnocentrically based.

Drawing a line here, it is possible to make several conclusions evaluating the place of language in the construct of the ethnogenetic myths. Firstly, since language

\textsuperscript{5} In ancient times, Scythia was a vast state in Minor Asia, inhabited by a group of Iranian nomadic people. Alans are related people and there is agreement amongst most historians that the Ossetian ethnic group was formed as a result of the mixing of Alans, who arrived from the Eurasian steeps, with the local highlanders from the central Caucasus (Shnirelman 2003, 462).

\textsuperscript{6} The territorial dispute between Georgians and Ossetians in the Soviet period is linked to the creation of the South Ossetian autonomy within Soviet Georgia in April, 1922 (the review of the South Ossetian ethnogenetic myths is given in Chapter Six).
identification was central to nationality policy in the Soviet Union, for ethnic groups it was necessary to maintain links between language ascribed to the group and the territory in question in order to preserve or upgrade the status of the ethnic group. Usually, the way to maintain such links was to create a myth of ethnogenesis built on the combination of the postulate of the continuous use of language and the first-settlers principle, and indigenous intellectuals played an important role in this process. Ethnogenetic myths made a core of official histories of ethnic groups, and the possibility of changing the version of official histories provided by the Soviet political settings led to a clash of myths of rival ethnic groups and the appearance of cycles in the myths formation. As we show in our examination of the South Caucasian ethnic conflicts in the following Chapters, this process made a major impact on the political environment in Soviet autonomies, enabling ethnic leadership to attempt an ethnic enclosure of the territories in rivalry, and greatly contributed to the growth of ethnic tensions in the area.