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In recent years, historiography has seen fundamental reassessments of Soviet postwar reconstruction, social mobilization as well as bureaucratic and middle class cultures. Yet, the character of Late Stalinism on the Soviet national periphery has been rarely addressed beyond the Sovietisation of the ‘new’ borderlands in the Baltics and Western Ukraine. At the same time, research on those nationalities with decades of Soviet experience often retracts long-established arguments of repression and resistance. This is most explicit when research on the postwar deportations and the pressure on national intelligentsia insists on the repression of any “real national sentiment”. The same tenor is present in arguments about the ‘exploitation’ of the official idiom or an ‘official nationalism’ strategically attuned to Moscow’s line as these are implicitly based on the assumption that while the affirmative nationality policies of the 1920s and the war years had fostered national identities the “Soviet” had had no lasting impact on people’s world-views.

What did members of the non-Russian nationalities conceive of the Soviet project after korenizatsia had turned into a hunt for “bourgeois nationalists” during the Great Terror, after collectivization and accelerated industrialization and after a war won over countless victims? This article looks at three instances during Late Stalinism when members of the Soviet Armenian elite defined what they saw as fundamental for the Soviet project after 1945. Analysing how representatives as diverse as the First Secretary and former perpetrator to the Great Terror or the formerly persecuted Head of the Armenian Church addressed issues as sensitive as territorial revisions directly after the war and the Central Committee discussed the role of national history during the Zhdanovshchina it is not mere strategy vis-à-vis Moscow that comes to the fore. The ways in which these diverse personalities merged and hybridized the ‘national’ with the ‘Soviet’ from their respective vantage point reveal how the Soviet project acquired a particular, meaningful relevance within the local context. Thus, the Armenian elite – as people throughout the Soviet Union – took part not only in the reconstruction, but also the reinvention of what the Soviet project was about and why it was worthwhile pursuing.