A political culture, as we noted at the outset of this study (see pp. 14–15), may be divided for analytical purposes into a number of distinct or overlapping political subcultures. Useful though it may be to speak of a national political culture, the level at which we have so far operated, it may at times be a loose or even entirely notional unit of analysis; other beliefs and values, other foci of identification and loyalty, may compete with and sometimes replace those associated with the national territorial unit as a whole. It may be helpful to regard such political subcultures as either ‘vertical’ or ‘horizontal’ in nature. A ‘vertical’ political subculture may be defined as one which relates to the shared social or demographic attributes of its members; the distinction between the ‘mass’ political culture and the ‘elite’ political culture of the political decision-makers and their associates, for instance, is of this nature. A political culture, however, is capable of further subdivision upon this basis: particular occupations or roles may generate a variety of associated beliefs and forms of behaviour; different generational groups may share assumptions and behavioural patterns which mark them off from the rest of the population; and perhaps most important, social groups or classes may have similar and distinctive life experiences such as to cause their patterns of political belief and behaviour to diverge significantly from the national norm. It is with the last of these sub-divisions, the differentiation of political belief and behaviour associated with particular educational or occupational backgrounds, that we shall be primarily concerned in this chapter.

Important though such divisions may be, however, they may at times be modified or even displaced by attachments which are ‘horizontal’ or area-based in character, and these must also be given due
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consideration. There is certainly no lack of internal divisions of this kind within the USSR: of regional or local differences, for instance, or of historic rivalries between major cities such as Moscow and Leningrad. By far the most important of such sub-divisions, however, are those associated with national or ethnic groups within the USSR, and it is these with which we shall be mainly concerned in this chapter. The majority Russian population is not an amalgam of immigrant groups, like the population of the USA, and it has enjoyed a long period of independent statehood within its traditional national frontiers, unlike, for instance, the populations of Italy and Germany. The identification of most Russians with the territorial unit within which they reside, accordingly, does not generally appear to be in question. Other national groups within the USSR have had periods of independent rule and have languages and cultures of their own, however, and it is clear that in many cases such differences may constitute foci of identification which conflict with or altogether supersede those which relate to the national territorial unit as a whole. It is to the most important of this group of political sub-cultures, the nationalities, that we turn at the outset.

‘Horizontal’ Political Sub-cultures: the Nationalities

There can clearly be no place in a volume of this kind for an exhaustive general discussion of the Soviet nationalities question as a whole. The main dimensions of the USSR’s existence as a multinational state, however, should at least be apparent from Table 7.1. Altogether, according to the 1970 census, there were more than 100 different nationalities within the USSR, and the Russians, although the most numerous, accounted for only just over half of the total, a proportion which has been tending gradually to decline over the years. The USSR is in fact the only major power in which the dominant nationality accounts for barely a majority of the total population; and with the continued more rapid growth of the non-Russian and especially of the Muslim nationalities of the USSR, which already account for almost a fifth of the total Soviet population, the time is not too far distant when Russians may find themselves a minority within the state to which they have given their language and their leadership. The implications of this fact are sufficient to make population policy—family size, regional distribu-