

Soviet nationalities policy



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After the Bolshevik Revolution, Bolsheviks inherited a vast multinational empire. The Soviet Union inherited the Russian Empire's multiethnic character. Composing just over half the population, ethnic Russians shared the world's first socialist state with more than 100 minorities, some numbering in the millions and others numbering in the low thousands. Some, such as the Poles, were Westernized and urbanized. Others, such as the peoples of the Caucasus and Siberia, lived in small villages and tribal-based societies. Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and Jews all inhabited Russia and had needs that presented challenges to any state. The problem of what to do with all these different ethnic groups in the new state formed the center of the "nationality question." In order to promote the integration of the non-Russians into the Soviet state, Lenin's nationality policy was practical and flexible enough. Unlike the late tsarist era, when non-Russian ethnic groups were discriminated by the imperial regime, the nationalities enjoyed formal political equality. This was seen as an important requirement for obtaining equal socioeconomic and cultural rights across various peoples and helping less developed nationalities to overcome their backwardness. Lenin believed that this strategy would eliminate ethnic discrepancies and settle the "nationalities question" for good and Lenin advocated recognition of the various peoples of the old empire as separate nationalities. In the localities the Soviet authorities pursued the policy of "indigenization" (korenizatsiia), designed to increase steadily the proportion of the representatives of the indigenous nationality in the local party and state administration. In addition, during the 1920s, the center actively co-opted representatives of non-Russian elites into central governing bodies. Moreover, the early nationalities policy of the Bolshevik government displayed considerable tolerance of non-

Russian languages and cultures and even systematically encouraged the development of “minor” languages. All this helped expand the ranks of non-Russian educated elites and led to a flowering of literature, the arts, and sciences in some of the republics and national autonomies.

Korenizatsiia set the stage for the Soviet Union’s current crisis of authority among the non-Russians. As an integrated linguistic, cultural, and personnel policy it sought to legitimate multiculturalism in the Soviet Union without creating multiple centers of power. The implementation of this policy during the dislocation wrought by industrialization raised the prestige of non-Russian languages and cultures and created the social bases necessary for multiculturalism. The establishment of multiple official languages and creation of social bases of support for them guaranteed “long-term or permanent linguistic division”. Korenizatsiia, in effect, “institutionalized and legitimated linguistic conflict and thus maintained it and perpetuated it”.

The liberal language policies and the indigenization drive endured until the mid-1930s, helping to enlist the support of broad sections of non-Russian populations for the party and the Communist regime. More controversially, they accelerated the process of nation building among major nationalities and nudged some of the minor ones in the same direction. The “indigenized” administrations tended toward greater independence from the center and craved greater national and cultural autonomy. They became breeding grounds for the spread of national communism in the republics as the desire to combine Communist ideas with national traditions. Contrary to the expectations of the Communist authorities, their policies did not do away with nationalism, but gave rise to nationalist ideologies and to gradual

consolidation of nationalities into nations. It was clear that the evolving national elites would not remain content for long with formal equality and would sooner or later claim greater political rights to complement their cultural and language rights. Between 1933 and 1938, korenizatsiia was not actually repealed. Its provisions merely stopped being enforced. There also began purges of the leaderships of the national republics and territories. The charge against non-Russians was that they had instigated national strife and oppressed the Russians or other minorities in the republics. In 1937 it was proclaimed that local elites had become hired agents and their goal had become dismemberment of the Soviet Union. Stalin's radical policies were accompanied by purges among republican elites to curb any nationalist tendencies and "deviations." They soon escalated into an all-encompassing wave of terror that peaked in 1936-38. It dealt a crushing blow to the administrative elites in the republics. The terror affected the elites of all nationalities, but its consequences in the union republics were particularly severe as it undermined many of the achievements of indigenization. Stalin's policies and the methods used to enforce them to a great extent put a chill on the process of nation building that had begun in the 1920s. As a result of the Stalin revolution, many of the ideological imperatives of the Soviet nationality policy were transformed. In the 1920s the party leadership had sought to eradicate all vestiges of the imperial mentality of Russians, derided as "Great Russian Chauvinism." Now the emphasis was reversed, and local nationalism was perceived a much bigger threat. The calls for international solidarity of proletarians were replaced by the new integrating ideology of Soviet patriotism and by the leader's cult.

Yuri Slezkine has described the USSR as a “communal apartment” in which each national group had its own “room”. To be sure, not all “rooms” were of the same size or importance. It should be noted, however, that to the very end of its existence the USSR remained at least rhetorically, but also in many practical ways, committed to the idea of cultural diversity. Russian culture was certainly “first among equals – *primus inter pares*”, but a certain space was always granted to non-Russian language and culture. The Soviet Union was a communal apartment, where each of the national republics had a separate room. They could decorate the room however they liked. They got to make the major decisions, but never pretended that they owned the apartment. He gives details the “Great Transformation” of 1928-1932, during which ethnic diversity was highlighted and celebrated; it then explains the “Great Retreat” during the 1930’s, when nationalism as a whole was discouraged except those select nationalities that reinforced socialist ideas and contributed to the overall success of the USSR. The author states to the fact that certain nationalities were seen as more worthy, therefore superior to others. It may not be along class lines, but the people of the Soviet Union were still divided. This promotion of nationalism most likely created more problems for the Soviet government in the long-term as nationalism grew stronger and threatened the Soviet’s unity and control.