

# Nationality's role in social liberation: the Soviet legacy

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## Contents

- [Soviet nationalities policy](#)
  - [Affirmative action](#)
  - [A mask for empire?](#)
  - [The paradox of Latinization](#)
  - [Internationalist synthesis](#)
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Just under a century ago, the newly founded Soviet republic embarked on the world's first concerted attempt to unite diverse nations in a federation that acknowledged the right to self-determination and encouraged the development of national culture, consciousness, and governmental structures. Previous major national-democratic revolutions – in Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the United States – had been made in the name of a hegemonic nation and had assimilated, marginalized, or crushed rival nationalities. The early Soviet regime, by contrast, sought to encourage, rather than deny, internal national distinctiveness.

This process was thrown into reverse gear during the Stalin era. Nevertheless, national self-assertion grew, ultimately becoming a major factor in the Soviet Union's collapse. Today, an array of sovereign states and autonomous republics stand as the Russian revolution's most prominent legacy to the new century.

The early Soviet experience grasped well the vitality of national feeling in the social movements of the last century and has useful lessons for us today.

## Soviet nationalities policy

The collapse of the Soviet Union, coming together with the opening of many Soviet archives, has encouraged important new scholarship, including book-length studies in English by Ron Suny, Terry Martin, and Jeremy Smith (see references, below). These works provide a clear picture of nationalities policy in the first ten years of the Soviet republic. Let us summarize:

- Among most minority peoples in Russia, at the time of the 1917 revolution, nationalism was not well developed. Nation-building took place chiefly in the Soviet era.

- Soviet power was structured through a federation, territorially divided to enable minority peoples to have their own governments. Control of economic and military matters, however, was delegated to the central government.
- This federative process extended to nations in formation and to peoples among whom a sense of nationality had previously been rare.
- The Soviet government encouraged a struggle against national oppression both outside and within its borders, even though the struggle for equality necessarily struck against privileges of the Russian people who had initially taken the lead in the 1917 revolution. In Central Asia and the North Caucasus, the anti-colonial struggle included reclaiming some of the land recently seized by Russian settlers.
- The Soviets committed substantial resources to the encouragement of minority national culture, including through the creation of alphabets and a standard for written national languages, and education and publishing in minority languages.
- The new Soviet order encompassed traditional custom, law, and local leadership of Asian minority peoples, including, for example, through defense of the nomadic mode of life and the integration of the Islamic Sharia into the Soviet legal system.
- Minority nationals received preference in access to higher education and job openings in both factories and public administration.
- The use of languages other than Russian was promoted in administration and higher education.
- National territories were extended downwards from the republic level to townships and villages, so that each republic was in fact a mosaic of differentiated national sub-units.
- Assimilation to the Russian majority, even voluntary, was resisted, by insisting that the education of all minority nationals take place in the language of their people.
- National administrations had responsibilities for regarding their nationals elsewhere in the Soviet republic, especially with regard to education. For the Jewish people, who had no national republic of their own, an all-union administration was created.

These programs, applied in the first decade of the revolution, suffered from many limitations and inadequacies. They had little impact in economic administration and the military. Their scope was restricted by the appalling poverty of Soviet society. They faced significant opposition both from many Russian nationals and within the Communist Party and its leadership. In the Soviet East, they were limited by the low educational level of the minority populations, whose literacy rates, in Central Asia, were between 2% and 7%. (Martin 2001, p. 127)

### **Affirmative action**

Nonetheless, progress was rapid and impressive. Consider a few examples:

- By 1927, in minority republics, 90% of non-Russian children were being taught in their own language; even outside national borders, the proportion was over 80%. (Smith 1999, pp. 159-61)
- In Ukraine, between 1923 and 1932, newspapers in Ukrainian expanded from 13% to 92% of total press circulation. (Martin 2001, p. 108)

- By 1927, Soviet newspapers were appearing in 47 languages. (Slezkine 1994, p. 437)
- In Central Asia, by 1927, titular nationals in the Communist Party had increased in number from near-zero to between 35% and 50% of the total membership. (Smith 1999, p. 141)
- The all-union network of Yiddish-language schools embraced the majority of Jewish students in Belorussia and Ukraine, the traditional centres of Jewish settlement. (Smith 1999, pp. 159-61)
- In Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, in 1927, titular nationals, despite literacy rates well under 5%, made up the majority of local Soviet executive bodies. (Smith 1999, p. 142)
- In Ukraine, where the working-class had in 1917 been almost entirely Russian in composition, Ukrainians became the majority in the trade union apparatus, and Ukrainian was widely introduced as the language of factory-based cultural and educational programs. (Martin 2001, pp. 101-2)

### **A mask for empire?**

Western scholars have frequently expressed scepticism regarding early Soviet nationalities policy. It is often perceived as, in Suny's phrase, "utopian fantasy or political dissimulation." Yuri Slezkine, for example, cites Stalin's cynical remark, "allow them to use the language and discontent will pass," and concludes that Soviet policy permitted "national form" only "because there was no such thing as national content." Language policy was driven to extremes, he argues, producing a veritable "Tower of Babel." (Suny 1993, p. 82; Slezkine 1994, pp. 418-19, 429)

Certainly scepticism was rife among Russian nationals. But there is strong evidence that among the minority nationalities, Soviet national policies were deeply felt and aroused enthusiasm. To take only one example, when the educational commissariat decided in 1932 to recruit 85 Ukrainian-language teachers for service among Ukrainian nationals in the Far East, 5,000 arrived, on their own initiative. The number of Ukrainian-language schools in this region went from zero to 1,300 in two years. (Martin 2001, p. 291)

Terry Martin describes Soviet policy with the striking and misleading phrase, "the affirmative action empire." In his view, the purpose of this policy was to lessen the impact of nationalism. In fact, however, there is ample evidence of growing national assertiveness and conflict in the 1920s, which he interprets as evidence of the policy's failure. Yet surely a policy designed to increase national consciousness and distinctiveness could have no other result.

There was a strong reason to accept this side-effect. Soviet leaders held that the road to socialism lay through enabling every people to experience free national development – that socialism could not be built by unfree peoples. The contradiction lay not in Soviet nationalities policy itself but in the Bolshevik party, where – as Martin demonstrates – Soviet nationalities policy ran into significant opposition at all levels.

The weight of this opposition was increased by this Communist Party's bureaucratization during the 1920s. As Trotsky remarked in 1927, "the resilient will of the interested masses themselves" was stifled, and decisions left to a ruling stratum "which approaches both economy and culture from the point of view of convenience of administration and [its] specific interests." (Trotsky 1972, pp. 170-71)

As for the powers of national governments, certainly they were limited by Bolshevik insistence on a unitary, centralized economy. They also suffered frequently from the arrogance and tactlessness of

central administrators, a phenomenon often assailed by Lenin. Nonetheless, the need for unified economic planning in the Soviet Union was very strong, especially from the viewpoint of impoverished Asian republics. On the other hand, the “cultural” issues assigned to the national republics concerned nothing less than overturning national oppression, the overriding fact of these peoples’ existence.

Consider what Martin tells us of Kazakhstan, where a traditionally nomad people was seeking to regain lands recently occupied by Russian settlers. In one incident, in August 1925, armed Kazakhs seized a Russian-occupied pasture. Less than a decade earlier, this land had been seized from Kazakhs by tsarist forces and handed over to Russian settlers brought in for that purpose, as part of a murderous suppression of a Kazakh revolt.

Now, however, when the expropriated Russian settlers threatened to seek redress, the Kazakhs insisted they had no reason to fear action by the local authorities. A petition by Russian settlers lamented, “Go to the police – a Kazakh. Go to the GPU [state political police] – a Kazakh. Go to the local Soviet – Kazakh.” (Martin 2001, p. 62) We can sense the consternation of the Russian settlers and the Kazakhs’ mood of triumph. In a few short years, Kazakhstan had been turned upside down.

Although foreign policy was officially the prerogative of the all-union government, Ukraine pursued foreign relations with Ukrainian minorities in Poland and Czechoslovakia as well as with eight million Ukrainian nationals in the Russian and other Soviet republics. Central Asian republics exerted control, for a time, over immigration. Delegates of Turkic republics took part, in 1926, alongside representatives from Turkey and Hungary, in a conference to plan the development of Turkic written languages – hardly a routine activity of Soviet regional governments. (Martin 2001, p. 193)

### **The paradox of Latinization**

Far from securing Russian hegemony, many initiatives of the Soviet government aimed to undermine it. Consider Latinization – the conversion of minority languages from Arabic and Cyrillic to Latin script. Initiated by Soviet Turkic republics against considerable resistance in Moscow, this switchover became official Soviet policy and eventually embraced 66 languages, before its reversal in the 1930s. (Martin 2001, pp. 185-203) Why would the central government, functioning almost entirely in Russian, undertake a policy that could only obstruct ease of communication?

Here Suny does well to remind us that “Soviet Russia was conceived ... as the first stone in a future multinational socialist edifice.... The Soviet state was the servant of internationalism,” and the Soviet Union not a melting pot but “the incubator of new nations.”

The founders of the Soviet state believed the revolution’s expansion would soon reduce its Russian heartland to a secondary role. The Slavic and Turkic Soviet republics were launching pads for revolutionary expansion westward and southward – Piedmonts, Martin calls them, by analogy with Italy’s unification process. As E.H. Carr has pointed out, “Soviet policy appealed in one broad sweep to the peoples of Asia as a whole,” both within and without the old tsarist borders. (Carr, vol. 3, p. 235)

This policy did not long endure. The adoption of a rounded affirmative action policy in 1923 came only one year before the Communist Party adopted the Stalinist concept of “socialism in one country,” which tore away the conceptual foundation of Soviet nationalities policy. The highpoint of affirmative action, in 1927, came the same year as the purging of the leading figure in Ukraine’s national renaissance, Oleksandr Shumskii – an act signalling that a counterrevolution on the national

question was well under way. By the late 1930s, a campaign to restore Russian national hegemony had taken on grotesque forms. During the last two years of Stalin's Great Terror, half of its victims were targeted in operations against national minorities. (Suny and Martin 2001, p. 14)

Yet through all this, the gains of the nationalities were not erased, and during the resurgent Russification of the Soviet Union's last decades, de facto autonomy of national republics was growing. The historian is tempted to simplify this contradictory reality by reducing it to a single consistent process. In fact, two opposed policies were at work in Soviet history, pointing in opposite directions: national liberation and Russification.

The legacy of early Soviet policy is found not only in the vitality of post-Soviet nations and national minorities today, but in attempts to apply this model in most subsequent revolutionary upheavals in multinational environments. Better than most other expressions of Marxism, the Bolsheviks grasped the vitality of nationalism in the imperialist era and also in post-capitalist states. They recognized that nationalism is not indivisible – the nationalism of the oppressed has a different logic than that of the oppressors. Moreover, even within an oppressed nation, nationalism takes counterposed forms as both a buttress of capitalist rule and a component of its exploited subjects' agenda for liberation – reflecting antagonistic class forces within the nation.

### **Internationalist synthesis**

In Lenin's time, Soviet encouragement of national development among minority peoples was also internationalist – seeking to unite all oppressed peoples against imperialism. This synthesis, so powerful in the early Communist International, was soon deformed and degraded. But it is often found in the world today – a synthesis that enables Bolivian revolutionists, for example, to champion sovereign rights simultaneously on four levels: for Bolivia, for its component indigenous peoples, for all Latin America, and for all the world's peoples against impending ecological catastrophe.

Paradoxically, the authority of the Russian revolution has directed our attention to the writings on this question of the Bolsheviks – above all, Lenin – in the years before 1917, in which Lenin speaks out sharply against federalism and positive action to promote minority cultures. Here we need to focus less on the Bolsheviks' anticipations of the revolution and more on their response when it actually took place. Here our task is made much easier by the outstanding recent analyses of early Soviet nationalities' policy.

To this, we must add a twenty-first century understanding of the merits of diversity. Capitalist globalization forcibly silences and marginalizes national cultures, force-feeding the world with the monotonous and sterile output of its imperialist rulers. A socialist vision embraces the coexistence of many traditions, many cultures, many languages.

The story of nationalities in the early Soviet republic expresses the materiality of nationalism, as an expression of the interplay of objective forces in human society and economy. The Russian revolution also shows how strongly national evolution can be affected by contingency and human agency. It underlines nationalism's contribution to struggles in conditions of colonization and national dependency. It encourages us in resisting forcible homogenization and national oppression under capitalism, and in integrating an affirmative nationalities program into our vision of socialist revolution.

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See also "[The Russian Revolution and national freedom](#)" on ESSF website (article 22309).

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\* <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2011/07/21/nationality's-role-in-social-liberation-the-soviet-legacy/>