'PRISON OF NATIONS'

THE NATIONAL QUESTION IN THE SOVIET UNION

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More or less the same territory that was within the Tsarist Empire came into the ambit of the Soviet Union after the October Revolution of 1917. This territory included around 200 more or less distinct ethno-linguistic groups. A crucial factor influencing events after the revolution was the fact that the industrial centres that dominated the economic life in the countries of the erstwhile Empire lay either within the Great Russian core or represented Great Russian outposts in 'alien' territory. In order to rejuvenate industrial production devastated after the war, revolution and subsequent civil war it was deemed necessary to re-incorporate the non-Russian territories of the defunct Empire into the Soviet Union.

On the ruins of the Empire a demand for separation came up in many regions but it soon became clear that this demand could only be realised with the help of foreign money and arms. A resurgent trend of Russian patriotism coincided with the practical need of the Bolsheviks to reunite outlying territories. Lenin resolved this problem by conceding unqualified right to secession to the nationalities that were formerly part of the Tsarist 'prison of nations', and this promise of freedom from oppression motivated the peoples of different nationalities to support the Bolsheviks. The programme of land redistribution gained them further support from the peasants of these territories. The non-Russian workers in the few industrial centres in Baku (in Azerbaijan), Riga (in Latvia) and Reval (or Tallinn in Estonia) also extended their support. The victory was that of a worker and peasant alliance.

The Bolshevik Party Programme of 1919 set down party principles and policy on the national question in the post-October Revolution period. It abolished privileges of any national group and established equal rights of all nationalities including the right to secede of colonies and non-sovereign nations. The 10th Party Congress of 1921 proclaimed that only economic development could ensure this equality.

So long as the national bourgeoisie was struggling to emancipate itself from 'medievalism' (i.e., feudalism), it was recognised as the legitimate bearer of the nation's will to secede and had the support of the proletariat; this could be the bourgeoisie of the own nation or that of other nations. But when the bourgeois-democratic revolution was completed and the stage was set for the transition to the socialist stage, then the proletariat became the legitimate bearer of the nation's will to secede; and it did this keeping in mind the overriding principle of the international unity of the proletariat and of the breaking down of national barriers in the socialist order. National and international principles were thus reconciled in socialist theory, as against the bourgeoisie, which did not really have any solution to the national question except for heightening national tensions and conflicts.

However, the socialist practice turned out to be not so pure. In general, recognition of the right to self-determination and secession was accorded sincerely and unreservedly after 1917. But there were also definitely cases of intervention in neighbouring territories by the Soviet state, which seemed to go against the grain of the Party doctrine on national self-determination as set out above. Soviet Russian military intervention took place in the Baltic countries in the winter of 1918-19, in the Ukraine in 1919 and again in 1920, and in Georgia in 1921.[1] Now federation was put forward as the political concept to satisfy the national aspirations of the former dependent nations of the Tsarist empire while simultaneously seeking to retain them within the Soviet framework. The proclaimed goal was socialist unitarism with federation only as a transitional stage.

Unrest and nationalist sentiment had manifested among the Muslim populations as early as 1905 due to the colonisation and settlement policy of the Tsarist regime. The entire Turkmen territory, for instance, had been annexed by 1886 after which there was an influx of Russian administrators, traders, soldiers and workers to build ports and the Transcaspian railway. Local protests by Russian workers to receive higher pay and better living conditions and later their revolt against the Tsarist regime rarely found support among the Turkmen due to their anti-Russian feelings. These had been inflamed due to the huge indemnities forced upon them for their revolts, the frequent looting of their flocks and herds and the redistribution of their best lands to Russian farmers. The Tsarist Russian regime had also introduced extensive cotton cultivation and karakul sheep to this region so that the tribal cultivators could pay the huge fines imposed on them. The resulting intermittent revolts of the Turkmen nomads from 1870 onwards, which continued up to 1927, were the most sustained and bloody confrontation with Russian expansionism in Central Asia.[2] Similarly, the filching of traditional grazing grounds from the Kazakhs for occupation by Russian settlers had been a source of hostility, so were the attempts to mobilise them for labour during the war. 1916 had witnessed a Kazakh rebellion. In Central Asia, as in Turkistan and in Kazakh territory, fermentation was at work in Khiva and Bukhara (in Uzbekistan) too.

The national question in these areas presented itself initially in the form of Muslim Congresses demanding autonomy for their regions. The Bolshevik Party's response to this was to offer aid to the oppressed peoples for bringing them independence. It assured them complete freedom of religious belief and customary usages and the retaining of their cultural and national institutions; in return it expected and asked for their support to the Russian revolution. A Congress of Muslim Communist Organisations was organised in Moscow in 1918, which set up a 'Central Bureau of Muslim Communist Organisations.' It issued propaganda material in many languages including a daily paper in Turkish, sent out agitators and organised local printing presses. Then the Soviet government went into active interventionist mode in these regions against so-called 'bourgeois' nationalist governments, as it had in the Ukraine. Some of them—like the Bashkir autonomous government—sided with the Orenburg Cossacks, who were in open warfare against the Soviet government. This intervention was now marked by vigorous attacks against the Muslim religion and its traditions and

practices because the national movements were often led by mullahs. An attempt was made to organise local Congresses of Soviets and proclaim Soviet autonomy.

The enforced Sovietisation proved inappropriate for this region. It failed to take into account the very different socio-economic conditions, culture and problems prevailing here, particularly among the nomadic populations. It also underestimated the hold of religion among the people. In the Northern Caucasus it regulated the daily life of the people in almost every respect—socially, legally, politically as well as spiritually. The imams and mullahs were judges, lawgivers, teachers and intellectuals as well as political and sometimes military leaders. Encountering stiff resistance to an anti-religion stance the Soviet government finally resorted to pitting younger Muslim priests against the older ones.

In Kazakhstan the land question was difficult to resolve along the usual lines. Russian settlers and settled Kazakhs opposed any move to return their cultivated holdings to Kazakh nomads, and the latter hence continued to view the Bolshevik government as suspiciously as they had viewed the Tsarist government. The autonomy that was granted to all the ethnic groups within the Russian Federation was subordinate to the centralised power and authority emanating from Moscow.

The territory of Russian occupied Turkistan was inhabited largely by Turkmens—who spoke Turkic dialects and were of Turkish origin, Tajiks, who formed a small minority, and the Uzbek and Kyrgyz people. Ethnically, there is little difference between the Kazakhs and the Kyrgyz. The Kara (black) Kyrgyz are mountain dwellers, while the Kazakhs are steppe dwellers. They share language and many customs and traditions. Tajiks are of mixed ethnicity and have lived together with the Uzbeks in Turkistan. They are bilingual and share a common history and culture.

Tashkent was the administrative centre of Turkistan and home of the largest Russian colony; and the revolutionary movement in Tashkent was confined to the Russian colony. The Russian population consisted of officials, merchants, intelligentsia and workers—all of whom joined the Communist Party. They shared a common ruling race mentality against the Muslim Turks, and did not allow equal participation to them in the government they formed. They were hardly prepared to cede authority and power to the Muslim masses and nationally-minded local intelligentsia. At a conference in Baku (Azerbaijan) called by the Bolsheviks for the representatives of Muslim revolutionary organisations, Norbuba-bekov, a revolutionary from Turkistan, voiced the aspirations and opinions of many when he asked the Communists to adapt to the specific conditions of Central Asia and supported the idea of setting up Muslim Communist Parties separate from the Bolshevik Communist Party. But the Russian Communists insisted upon a single party for the proletarians of all nations of a given stete.

The foremost advocate of a separate Muslim Communist Party was Mir Said Sultan Galiev (1880-1939), who saw in this the only guarantee against Great Russian chauvinism and the possibility of being more sensitive to local conditions. He believed that Marxism and Islam could co-exist and advocated gradualism, education and the raising of political consciousness among the masses, while insisting that Islam should not be directly attacked.[3] The lack of understanding of tribal culture, its nationalism and strong religious sentiments

created problems in the region and brought forth on the Bolshevik party the accusation of following a colonial policy under the guise of Communism. Galiev was arrested in 1923 and charged with nationalist deviation; during the purges of the 1930s he was to disappear.

The new borders that were later drawn up under Stalin artificially divided the people of this region as Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Kazakhs, Uzbeks and Turkmens and ultimately pitted the ethnic groups and republics against one another. For example, Ferghana Valley, which had been a cohesive economic unit at the heart of Central Asia, was divided and Samarkand and Bukhara—major centres of Tajik culture and history—were parceled off into Uzbekistan. The Tajiks complained that they were left with uninhabited mountainous regions of the Pamirs and had no rich agricultural land.[4] Uneven development within these regions under the Soviet Union led to simmering discontent and laid the basis for ethnic conflict.

Forced sovietisation took place in the Transcaucasian region also, where the main nationalities were the Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani.[5] The whole of Siberia was similarly incorporated into the RSFSR (Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic) in 1922. The RSFSR consisted initially of eight autonomous republics and thirteen autonomous regions (which increased considerably in number later) and accounted for 92 percent of the area and 70 percent of the population eventually to be included in the USSR.[6] This incorporation marked the more or less complete reunification of the former Russian Empire into the USSR. This unity was perceived to be required for economic development and for the defence of the Union and was to be ensured on the basis of equality of all nationalities with no discrimination. The absolute rejection of any discrimination between individuals on grounds of nation, race or colour remained the asserted Bolshevik policy. This equality became largely defined in economic terms and was to be realised by aid from the central government to the 'backward' nations and regions to bring them on a par with the more developed ones. The aid extended comprised material aid, education services, loaning of technical experts and training of members of the backward nations to become its future experts.

Productive processes too were to be distributed over the entire territory. Hitherto, industry had been confined to a few centres of East European Russia, whereby the outlying borderlands had been treated as sources for the supply of food and raw materials. In the interest of equality industry was to be planted throughout the Soviet Union, which would also increase in these outlying areas the number of industrial workers who formed the bulwark of a proletarian state. Thus textile factories were introduced in Turkistan so that value addition could be done there itself.[7]

However, in practice, this mode of creating equality did not always work out due to the constraints created by the growing concentration of authority at the Centre in Moscow. The other 'less developed' nationalities got subordinated to the Great Russian core in the process. Centralisation meant standardisation rather than sensitivity and adaption to local conditions.

This subordination and 'russifica-tion', or Great Russian domination, manifested itself in many ways: None of the republics had independent armies; The Red Army had detachments from the constituent republics of the RSFSR and

from the allied republics; Great Russians predominated in the trade unions as well which were organised according to trades and not on national republican basis. The Communist Party of Russia played the same dominating role as the trade unions and army in the Union: it reinforced Great Russian chauvinism. From 1903 onwards, Lenin had insisted on a unified party and rejected any autonomous status for a constituent party as had been demanded by the Jewish Bund. After the revolution, too, no independent Communist parties were allowed on the basis of nationality or religion; the Central Committees of the Communists in the federated republics were regional committees within the Party and subordinated to the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party, which in 1925 was renamed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolshevik).

Though the Party continued to criticise Great Russian chauvinism and the need to curtail it, it only grew in time. Russian patriots supported the Bolsheviks in the civil war, in the Soviet-Polish war of 1920, and advanced into key positions during the NEP (New Economic Policy). They understood that the Bolsheviks were restoring Great Russia better than the white generals. Great Russian chauvinism derived its strength from two lines of thinking: one was the rejection of any kind of nationalism, a national nihilism, as incompatible with international proletarian solidarity and class rule by the proletariat. The second was the fact that the majority of the industrial proletariat in what was now incorporated into the Soviet Union was Great Russian, whereas the other nationalities were predominantly peasants. Within the alliance of the two, Marxian orthodoxy awarded the leading role to the industrial proletariat. Both these approaches strengthened Great Russian chauvinism and solidified into a nationalistic deviation, all lip-service to internationalism to the contrary. Once these territories were incorporated into the Soviet Union the shortage of trained local leaders and administrators loyal to the new regime was overcome by importing such leaders from the Russian Socialist Soviet Republic.[8]

What is needed to now examine is whether the Bolshevik policy of ‘voluntary’ union was able to bring about equality between the nations it comprised of, that is, whether it was able to overcome the capitalist-imperialist division of labour between advanced industrial nations and backward colonial ones.

Looking at the first Constitution of the USSR, one finds that it was not genuinely federal but unitary in nature. A Commission had been appointed in 1923 by the All-Union Congress of Soviets to draft the Constitution, but it was eventually drafted essentially by a group of leaders within the CPSU(B). The word ‘federal’ was not used to describe the Union, though the Constitution provided a number of federal provisions, like the division of competence between the authorities of the USSR and those of the republics, a bicameral assembly (with a Council of Nationalities) and the right to secession, which could not be abridged without the consent of the republics. The Soviet Union was always referred to as a “single union state.” (The Party programme indeed stated that the federal union of states was a transitional form to complete unity, that is, of their eventual liquidation).[9]

The trend towards centralisation and concentration of power continued unabated down the years. The Party made all major decisions of policy. The needs of a planned economy also necessitated centralisation. Article 1 of the

Constitution made the supreme organs of the union responsible for the "establishment of the foundations of the general plan of the whole economy"; four of the five unified Commissariats dealt with economic matters.

Unfortunately, the way centrally planned development was carried out in non-Russian territories, particularly in Central Asia ended up in making them into colonies of Moscow and was accompanied by an attempt at annihilation of their culture and history. The use of the Arabic script was forcibly ended in favour of a Latin script in 1922, and then Cyrillic after 1935, to increase the pace of integration with Russia. Only those works from the past were translated into Cyrillic that the Communists considered appropriate. There was an attempt to forcibly uproot Islam, beginning with wholesale destruction of mosques and madrasahs, and then stopping the use of Arabic as a link language, and finally by cutting off all ties to the pan-Muslim world. In 1917, there were around 26,000 mosques in Central Asia; by 1940 there were 1,312 and by 1985 only 400 mosques were active.[10]

In economic terms these regions produced cotton, metals, oil and other raw materials for the Soviet economy. Local value addition was minimal in relation to raw material production. A powerful Russian minority (in Kazakhstan it was nearly half the population) emerged in all these republics and it formed the technical and political brain power here. In Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) it had the best jobs in government and industry. In Ashkhabad (Turkmenistan) the Russian migrants took over the best housing and jobs available and became a majority population. The irrigation of vast areas for cotton and grain cultivation led to acute water shortages and pollution, the drying up of lakes and seas, and was the cause for desertification.[11] Kazakhstan, which during the Second World War became a major dumping ground for ethnic groups suspected of collaborating with Hitler to gain independence from the Soviet Union, was also made the location of heavily polluting industries such as lead and chemical plants, for nuclear tests and for agricultural experiments that drained the ground water. Since the 1950s Kazakh nomads herding their flocks around one such site suffered the consequences of massive doses of radioactive fallout: children were born blind, mute, deaf, and without limbs or fingers; the population suffered high cancer rates and had a mortality rate three times higher than in earlier periods. Suicides due to illnesses became common.[12]

Inter-ethnic rivalries and strife continued to exist due to unequal economic development and because the Soviet system rather than overcoming the tribal and clan system allowed it to sustain and consolidate on the regional levels of the Communist Party alienating large masses of people from the government.

At the 22nd Congress of the CPSU in 1961 it was declared that the Soviet Union had solved the nationalities question, that there was now almost complete fusion between all ethnic regions and groups and what existed was the Soviet man, the Soviet people. There were, however, some indications in this report and at subsequent Party congresses that nationalist antipathies continued to exist and needed to be overcome.[13] And, in fact, in the late 1960s and '70s rumblings of discontent began to manifest themselves once again among the non-Russian

peoples. The reasons for this discontent were manifold, some of which have already been delineated above.

The Second World War had also aggravated the sentiments of many small nationalities in the Russian Federation, who with a resurgence of Russian patriotism were looked upon as being 'disloyal.' The fact was that sections of the Crimean, Ukrainian and other south-western nationalities collaborated with the invading forces because of their underlying undying nationalism. As a consequence, the Meskhetin Turks, inhabitants of South Georgia, along with other nationalities such as the Volga Germans, Crimean Tartars, Balkars, Chechens, Kalmyks, Iranians, Poles, Romanians and others—a total of 5 million people—were forcibly deported to Central Asia and Siberia.

The Meskhetin Turks form a special case among them. One-fourth of those transported died in transit or within the first few months of resettlement. 40,000 of them had fought in the war against Germany; 14,000 survived to return to empty villages and they too were deported to find that most of their kin were no more. What had they fought for, when in the end they did not even have a homeland?[14] In the 1960s some of the deported peoples were exonerated and repatriated to their original homelands. For others, only their special migrant status was cancelled and they were allowed to leave Central Asia, which led to a scattering of their population. Such a policy promoted the development of national movements seeking ethnic consolidation and re-emigration to the original homelands.*

Ethnic tensions also arose because of the borders that had been drawn by the Centre. In the course of Tajiks and Uzbeks putting up rival territorial claims the Uzbeks had tried to enlist the Meskhetin Turks on their side on the basis of a pan-Turkic identity. This led to their massacre by Tajiks in 1989. The wish of the Meskhetin Turks to return to their original homeland was not honoured because these areas had been compulsorily resettled with West Georgians.

Much opposition and discontent started surfacing due to what began to be perceived as Moscow's neocolonial economic policy towards Central Asian republics: the lack of adequate value addition within these raw materials producing regions, the subsequent high rate of unemployment, inadequate supply of consumer goods for day-to-day needs, inadequate health, education and housing infrastructure, the blatant disregard of the specific socio-economic and cultural requirements of nations and nationalities and development on that basis, absence of real decision-making powers on these 'local' levels, the corruption of Communist officials and bureaucrats, their abuse of power, the 'import' of Russians as skilled workers and specialists to man the state administration and as managers in enterprises, and their domination over local people.

The laudable aim of the Party to help the non-Russian peoples to 'catch up' with Central Russia had degenerated by the 1970s into their overlordship in these republics. Their over representation in the upper echelons of the party and administrative-management hierarchies, and under representation of Central Asians in these and in higher and specialised education were causes for resentment. Though the official censored press rarely reported on such issues, there were clashes between Russians and Uzbeks, which took place under the

slogan "Russians get out of Uzbekistan."[15] The chauvinism of migrant Russian populations, who refused to learn and speak the local languages and adjust to the culture and customs of the local citizens, was resented alienating them from the local people. Anti-Russian sentiments also took the form of a refusal to speak the Russian language, which from being a link language had become the official language by the time of Brezhnev.

The policy of russification also implied that the non-Russian cultures and religions were held to be inferior. Native languages and cultures began to be ignored and denigrated by their own people. Indigenous literary and musical forms, national dress and other cultural forms were discarded in favour of the Western opera, prosaic socialist realism and European dress. Traditional musical instruments were ridiculed. Central Asian epics—the *Alpamysh* and *Manas*—disappeared from libraries and bookshops. Local names having associations with local history and personages were arbitrarily replaced with Russian ones.[16]

The Northern small peoples also complained about and began to organise themselves against the devaluation of their local culture and values and the consequent destruction of their habitat and traditional occupations through reckless mining and industrialisation activities. The case of the Nivikhs of the Chukotka region is illuminating. For generations these people lived by hunting whales. Then they were shifted out of their lands to modern flats in townships away from the sea. They were not able to adjust physically to the new conditions and their mortality rate rose to more than double of the rest of the country.[17] Disappearance of their traditional activities led to unemployment or underemployment and alcoholism.[18]

The opposition to Russian colonial domination that began to surface in the 1960s and '70s took many forms: a refusal to speak Russian, questioning of standardisation and one's own induced contempt for earlier local culture and ethics, a search for lost local identities; preservation and restoration of historical monuments; raising of ecological-environmental issues. A new national awareness became evident in the works of writers, filmmakers and painters.

In the 1980s, in the atmosphere of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness), the Armenians sought a reappraisal of the artificially created geographical boundaries, where pockets of one nationality had been incorporated into a neighbouring republic. The Baltic republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia that had been annexed into the Soviet Union in 1940 under secret protocols of the Hitler-Stalin or Molotov-Ribbentropp 'Non-aggression Pact'of 1939[19] now began openly pressing for redressing of their grievances, particularly in relation to the repression that had followed after their incorporation into the Soviet Union. They, on their part, had brutally suppressed the Russian population in their midst and many had collaborated with the Gestapo during the War. Soon they began to demand complete independence and succeeded in gaining it. Similarly, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldava and the Ukraine succeeded in declaring themselves independent too.

The unexpectedly hostile approach of the Gorbachev regime to the movements of the non-Russian nationalities, the arrests and state violence resorted to in the Baltic areas, in Byelorussia, Armenia, and Ukraine helped in radicalising the

demands towards secession.[20] Authoritarian means of managing the transition to a market-based economy integrated into the global market economy did not succeed.[21] The non-Russian republics mentioned above, later the Central Asian republics, and finally the Russian Federation itself (led by the clique around Yeltsin) thought they would benefit much more by integrating themselves independently into the global capitalist economy, rather than getting hamstrung within a Soviet Union that delegated the republics insufficient powers. The eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union set off a similar chain reaction in its East European satellite states.

Notes :

1. See E H Carr, the Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923. Vol. 1. London: Penguin Books, 1975 (c. 1950) pp. 277-78 and pp. 295-312. For this account and analysis of nationality policy in the Soviet Union I have mostly relied on E.H. Carr's presentation in this volume on the Bolshevik revolution.
2. See Ahmed Rashid: The Resurgence of Central Asia. Islam or Nationalism? Karachi:OUP, 1994, p. 192.
3. Ibid. pp. 29-30.
4. Ibid., p. 162.
5. E.H. Carr, op. cit, pp. 343-54.
6. Ibid., p. 384, 397.
7. Ibid., pp.368-70
8. Ibid., pp. 376-81.
9. Ibid., pp. 403-04, 411.
10. Ahmed Rashid, op.cit., p. 35
11. Ibid., pp. 4, 5.
12. Ibid., p. 123.
13. Ajit Roy: National Relations in the Soviet Union : Theory and Practice. EPW, Jan. 1-8, 1994, p. 51.
14. See Kalpana Sahni: Moscow and Nationalities. EPW, June 2, 1990, p. 1187.
15. Ajit Roy, op.cit., pp. 53-54.
16. See K Sahni, op.cit., pp. 1189-90.
17. Ibid, p. 1189.
18. See also K S Singh (ed.) : Ethnicity, Caste and People. Proceedings of the Indo-Soviet Seminars held in Kolkata and Leningrad, 1990. Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1992, pp. 254-58.
19. Ajit Roy, p. 51.
20. K Sahni, p. 1191.
21. See AT Callinicos : Reflections on the Revolutions in Russia. EPW, Dec. 21, 1991.

*Genocidal policies were also implemented against Jews in Russia. A government-instigated anti-semitic campaign (in the name of a drive against cosmopolitanism) was launched in the 1930s and '40s along with a state-sponsored pan-Russian hysteria in the post-war period. Staged trials, imprisonment and execution of prominent Jewish intellectuals ran parallel to the rewriting of history books extolling everything Russian. (See Kalpana Sahni, Moscow and Nationalities, EPW, June 2, 1990, p. 1189)