Ethnic Autonomy in the Soviet Union

Ethnic nationalisms constitute a major obstacle on the road to national integration and the building of a uniform Soviet political culture.

As one of the superpowers and a leading actor in the international arena, the Soviet Union has for years projected an image of total national identity to foreign partners. Internally also the same image prevails. At the twenty-fourth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) General Secretary Brezhnev stated, "In the years of Socialist construction, a new historical community of people—the Soviet people—arose in our country."

Even though the very name, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, indicates a de jure federal structure, customary foreign references to the country's activities are couched in terms of "the Russians," with little thought and understanding of the fact that Russians constitute only half of the Soviet population and that the other half consists of a multitude of other ethnic groups, too important and too numerous to be dismissed as merely minorities. When in 1944 the Soviet Union attempted to enlarge its representation in the United Nations (then in the planning stage) by requesting separate seats for all of its constituent republics, this was a surprise to the international community. Their national sovereignty questionable, only two of the republics, Ukraine and Belorussia, were admitted to the UN, a result of a compromise. They and the USSR have since spoken in one voice in the international arena, and thus have done little to undermine the Soviet Union's image as a homogenous state.

The image notwithstanding, the Party has been engaged from the outset in a vigorous effort at nation building, attempting to forge a Soviet state within the largely unchanged boundaries of the old Russian Empire. Early discussions and disagreements among Bolshevik leaders—as they searched for a formula that would reconcile the Party's proclaimed principle of the right to national self-determination with the need to preserve a national power base required for survival—were resolved by the adoption of the so-called Leninist nationality policy. This provided that the new society would be "national in form and Socialist in content." Politically, it has been reflected in federal constitutional forms, the leadership of which is provided by the Party. Culturally, it promotes formal aspects of national minority cultures' media, with the message tailored to the requirements of the current Party line. In practice the policy imposes basic limitations on the exercise of either political or cultural autonomy.

Although the concept of the Soviet nation was formulated within the ideological class matrix of Marxism-Leninism, it became almost totally infused with ethnic Russian political and cultural heritage. The nation-building process concentrated on a three-pronged effort: to build an industrial base, to transform the society to conform to Marx's classless vision, and to create a New Soviet Man imbued with Socialist ethics and norms. The first part of the effort proved to be by far the easiest. In the half century since the Revolution the Soviet Union made great strides in economic development. The society was transformed, but class differentiation remains, and the Party's intensive political socialization did not fully succeed in creating a New Man and a common Soviet national consciousness. The Great Russians equate...
their national heritage with Soviet patriotism, but other ethnic groups not only stubbornly refuse to abandon their separate national identity but also promote it through various means at their disposal. Ethnic antagonism between the dominant Russians and all other groups is gaining in intensity and is assuming an increasingly divisive character.

Salient Variables

Problems of ethnicity, as they interact within the Soviet political system, require examination of the nature and characteristics of the key variables: the demographic and political base, characteristics and role of the Great Russians and other ethnic groups, demographic and economic trends and requirements.

Demographic and Political Base. The last Soviet population census of January 15, 1970, listed 90 separate nations and nationalities (plus an "other" category of over 100,000) in the total population of 242 million. Of these, 129 million (53 percent of the total) were Russians, and the three Slavic groups—Russians, Ukrainians (the second largest with almost 41 million), and Belorussians (the fourth largest with 9 million)—together accounted for three-fourths of the total Soviet population. The Uzbeks (with 9.2 million) replaced Belorussians as the third largest population group since 1959, and they were followed by the Tatars (5.9 million), the Kazakhs (5.3 million), the Azerbaijanis (4.4 million), the Armenians (3.6 million), and the Georgians (3.2 million) as the fifth through ninth largest groups, respectively. Four other national groups numbered between two and three million people—Moldavians, Lithuanians, Jews, and Tadzhiks—and 10 between one and two million—German, Chuvash, Turkmen, Kirgiz, Latvians, the peoples of Dagestan, Mordvinians, Bashkirs, Poles, and Estonians.

Under the Soviet federal structure, numbers alone do not guarantee an ethnic group a union republic or even an autonomous republic status, as other conditions have to be met, such as compactness of settlement, geographic location (border location is necessary for a union republic), economic unity, and a common psychological make-up. While not listed among formal requirements, political considerations are also of major importance. Thus the Volga Tatars have an autonomous republic but Crimean Tatars, deported during the war, are dispersed throughout Central Asia. Most Jews refused to settle in an autonomous province assigned to them in Eastern Siberia and are scattered throughout the Soviet Union, and the Germans (deported from their Volga region) and the Poles (war deportees and nonrepatriated inhabitants of western Ukraine and Belorussia) do not have an autonomous unit at all. Large ethnic groups have either a union or an autonomous republic, smaller groups have either an autonomous province or a national region. In the early seventies there were in the Soviet Union 15 union republics, 20 autonomous republics, 8 autonomous provinces, and 10 national regions.

The CPSU enjoys the monopoly of power and directs all activities in the Soviet political system. Unlike the state structure, the organization of the Party does not