CHAPTER 6

The Revolution in the West and East: Hegemony and the National Question

We have seen that the national question played a crucial role in discussions about language and hegemony in the pre-revolutionary period, when Lenin had argued that the proletariat needed to demonstrate that it was through its leadership that the oppressed nationalities could achieve self-determination. Lenin argued that by removing all compulsion and adopting policies to facilitate the social development of hitherto oppressed peoples, the proletariat could attract the oppressed to its cause. The proletariat’s internationalism would ultimately break the oppressed from the influence of the nationalist bourgeoisie and the religious authorities, and the revolution would become an example to the oppressed colonies of the great powers. There is little doubt that this policy proved itself during the revolution itself and helped to bring significant numbers of indigenous peoples over to the side of the Bolsheviks in the struggle against the White armies. Chaotic and regionally varied though the Civil War was, movements for national liberation generally found that what the White generals had in mind was not the national policy advocated by the Cadets, but the re-establishment of the Russian Empire. The Bolsheviks were, however, forced to defend most of the territory of the old Empire as if it were a single country and to introduce military-administrative divisions which cut across ethnographically distinct areas. Even in the aftermath of the Civil War, nations were incorporated into the USSR in a messy, complex series of struggles that involved competing geopolitical interests with a range of ‘great powers’, all of whom were keen to place the Soviet state in as great a danger as possible. Once a territory had been incorporated, efforts were made to ensure significant concessions were granted to win the trust of the local populations, but it was perhaps here that the shifting nature of the problematic of hegemony can be seen most clearly.

1 On the difficult relationship between the Bolsheviks and the central Asian reformists, see Khalid 1998.
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The Bolsheviks emerged from the War as leaders of an encircled one-Party state, ruling in the name of a proletariat that had since ceased to exist as a self-conscious entity. The new state was now subject to some of the same geopolitical, competitive pressures that had acted upon the tsarist state as a Eurasian power. The resulting pressures for institutional standardisation and centralisation ran counter to the motivations of most leaders of the Bolshevik Party, and the first years after the war show constant grappling between pragmatism and principle. As Jeremy Smith concludes, the Bolshevik nationality policy ‘evolved haphazardly in response to specific circumstances’, but according to a pattern that would lead to the prioritisation of the ‘expansion of national education and the promotion of national culture’ from 1923 until the end of the decade. As effective power became more centralised, so the cultural autonomy of national territories increased, with significant transfers of resources from the metropolitan centre to the periphery. On the one hand, the hegemony of the Soviet state, which proclaimed itself to be synonymous with that of the proletariat, facilitated socio-cultural development and conferred considerable benefits. On the other hand, however, the formerly oppressed peoples were divided into administrative units, between which there was often considerable friction, and were thus rendered less able to resist the shift of power to the centre. As the decade progressed, hegemonic strategy shifted inexorably in the latter direction.

With the revolutionary wave in Europe having ebbed, the Party bureaucracy in the ascendency and the policy of ‘socialism in one country’ officially endorsed, nationality and language policy became fundamentally oriented on the development of administrative mechanisms for the creation of a ‘harmonious multi-national state’. This in itself represented a significant change in nationality policy from the November 1917 ‘Declaration of the rights of the peoples of Russia’, which had asserted that all peoples had the right to secede and that no frontiers would be drawn, and the principles of which were incorporated in the RSFSR Constitution, endorsed by the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets on 10 July 1918. Emphasis now shifted to bureaucratic definition and delimitation of nationalities on the basis of the criteria of Stalin’s 1913 Marxism and the National Question, undertaken by the Commissariat of Nationalities, which he headed. The goal of liberation of the peoples became subordinated to defending the interests of the Soviet state, leading the Russian nationalist,

3 Stalin 1953 [1913].