``Workers of the World Unite!": Central Asia and the Nationalities Question

Stand up, all victims of oppression,
For the tyrants fear your might!
Don't cling so hard to your possessions,
For you have nothing if you have no rights!

(The Internationale, Billy Bragg’s English version)

The Nationalities Question and Communist Doctrine

To understand the processes the Jewish population underwent by virtue of its position as a distinct national group within the family of nations comprising the Soviet Union, one needs to grasp the ideology and managerial culture of the Soviet Union and the processes that led to its national division into separate Soviet republics. Moreover, the ethnic diversity of the disparate Jewish groups within the Union and the different policies adopted towards them reveal that the Jewish population, rather than being a homogeneous national group, was made up of so to call ‘separate’ national groups.

In USSR, nationality theory, propaganda, and ultimately implementation of policy, operated on parallel levels and was replete with contradictions and ambiguities. Thus, for example, according to Lenin and Stalin, nationality was based on “objective” criteria outside of and detached from the self-definition of the individual and could be evaluated scientifically. Therefore, the criteria, rather than the individual determined one’s national affiliation. The criteria were not designed for a specific nationality, but were “objective” tools through which all national affiliation could be and was ‘diagnosed.’

Parallel to such “fostering of nationality,” Communist propagandists also claimed that nationality itself was a capitalist invention designed to sow the

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1 For Stalinist determination of nationality, see: The Essential Stalin, ed. Bruce Franklin (London, 1973), pp. 54-56, 78-84.
seeds of hostility and divisiveness among the working classes, and that in the Communist state such particularities would be eradicated. Thus a dichotomy existed between the right to national definition and expression in the present, and a merging into Soviet civil society (wiping out national differences) in the future. The stages differentiating between and creating new nations were clear-cut, and the national boundaries imposed by Soviet rule, in effect, maintained and perpetuated recognized national divisions. In practice, neither the final stage of actual merging, nor the preliminary steps for its realization were achieved.2

As a result of the ideological approach toward the issue of nationalities and in order to demonstrate that Soviet Russia was not but another empire exploiting the peoples under its rule, Communist leaders decided that the multinational territory would be divided into self-administered entities to be governed by their own nationals in their own languages. In addition, a unique and discrete form of national culture (on the condition that it was socialist in content) was constructed and fostered for each national group. The 1920 census enumerated 192 languages, defined as official national languages. Books in 66 languages and newspapers in 47 languages were published throughout the 1920s in the Soviet Union.3 In the 1920s, the right to a distinct national designation took the form of creation of defined national regions, some of which became Soviet republics, others autonomous republics, and still others autonomous regions. National division did not end here; it aspired to extend to the individual whose identity was also defined according to a shared nationality. The individual’s right to national expression and national education and culture was only possible within a collective context, which was determined according to the parameters of a physical territory and the majority of a given population. In order to allow maximum self-expression, minimal parameters were determined for recognized disparate national units which extended down to urban areas (Raisovet- raionnyi sovet: a (rural) sub-district or (urban) neighborhood council) and regional rural administrative units (Sel’sovet- sel’skii sovet: a rural soviet or rural council).4 Each official national unit was entitled to administer its own educational system and its official correspondence was conducted in a separate national language. Yet, even in such large

2 According to the “Communist Manifesto” the workers of the world should unite, see: Robert Kaiser, The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR (Princeton, 1994), pp. 97-98.

3 Slezkine, ‘communal apartment’, p. 323; A bibliographic guide for newspapers in the USSR name 82 different languages for periodical publications in the USSR, see: Gazety SSSR 1917–1960, ed. E. Stroeva (Moscow, 1984) (Newspapers of USSR).

4 Martin, Affirmative, p. 71.