possible, for the Stalinist system acquired a momentum of its own. The beast was feeding on itself.

Hoffmann is determined to refute the great retreat thesis. He is not successful in doing so. His main argument is that Stalinism was not a retreat because the leadership said that there was no retreat from socialism, but on the contrary socialism was already achieved and the Soviet Union was in the process of building a communist society. Of course it is easy to show that Stalin’s era was not a return to the Tsarist past. No one has ever claimed that it was. There never is any return to the past, certainly not in the case of the Soviet Union after the great traumas the country had suffered in the previous decades. But that is not the point. The point is that the Russian revolution, as all great revolutions, was fought in the name of liberation; it was fought by people who were at least at the outset genuine internationalists and believed in the possibility of building a just society; and it was fought in the name of equality. Stalinism was indeed a great retreat because all the emancipatory ideas were abandoned one by one. One may argue that such a development was inevitable and the noble aims of 1917 were unrealizable, but that makes it no less of a retreat.

Hoffmann is a serious scholar, who knows the period well. He is well acquainted with the secondary literature and has worked in the relevant archives. He is correct in maintaining that Stalinism was a variety of modernization and that the efforts of building a modern society were by no means without achievements. It is, however, surprising that he betrays a curious naiveté in taking at face value Soviet official pronouncements. The proposition that the great variety of cultural forms, including iconoclastic art, disappeared in the 1930s because the social base, namely the bourgeoisie, also disappeared is laughable. The uniformity of socialist realist art was a direct consequence of terror. No terror, no socialist realism. Hoffmann is simply wrong in asserting on page 5 that Politburo members could not dictate the content of every film. They could and they did.

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The Bolsheviks came to power in 1917 having promised the peoples of the Russian Empire national self-determination. But it was only as they then tried to build a centralized Communist state and economy, and in the face of a civil war that demonstrated the strength of nationalist ideals as a mobilizing force, that the new regime had to give concrete meaning to this slogan. By 1923, the Bolsheviks adopted a strategy that Terry Martin terms the “Affirmative Action Empire.” In this detailed, wide-ranging study, Martin offers a comprehensive interpretation of nationalities policy in the pre-war Soviet Union. He traces the elaboration of the “Affirmative Action Empire” model, the tensions that emerged in its implementation, and the far-reaching revision of nationalities policy in the mid-1930s that came to be embodied in the new slogan of the “Friendship of Peoples.”
According to Martin, the “Affirmative Action Empire” was the “national constitution of the USSR,” the basic rules by which the USSR functioned as a multi-national state. It was always a strategy, he cautions, rather than a core policy of the Bolshevik regime. Basically, it involved an attempt to reconcile the tension between the Bolsheviks’ desire not to be perceived as an empire and their aim to further the socialist vision of an economically and politically powerful central state. The Bolsheviks sought to de-politicize national identity by constructing a plurality of nation-like territories that would, according to Joseph Stalin’s famous formulation, be “national in form, socialist in content.” A series of decisions made by the Twelfth Party Congress and a special Central Committee conference on nationalities policy in 1923 laid the basis for this new kind of national entity. The resolutions declared that the Soviet state would support the establishment of national territories within its borders, foster the development of national languages and elites within those territories through a policy of korenizatsia or indigenization, and promote the distinctive national identity of its non-Russian populations. Soviet Russia thus became the first country to adopt affirmative action programs for national minorities. The corollary of these was that the formerly dominant Russians did not receive their own national territory, and their culture was downplayed as one that had traditionally served an oppressive role. Neither a traditional empire nor a federation, the “Affirmative Action Empire” defined itself as an anti-imperial and multi-national state where no one ethnic group enjoyed “state-bearing” status.

Regardless of Bolshevik intentions, the policies of the “Affirmative Action Empire” established a strong connection between nationality and territory and a tension between territorial and personal definitions of nationality that was never really resolved. Martin brings out well the contrast in implementation of affirmative action policies among the so-called “advanced” “western” nationalities, where linguistic korenizatsia was especially successful, and the “culturally backward” “eastern” ones, where policies to promote members of the titular nationality to positions of power predominated. He highlights the unexpected interactions of Bolshevik policies – for example, how creating German or Polish national soviets in Ukraine counteracted other policies aimed at economic levelling in the countryside. Similarly, he provides a fascinating description of the border disputes that developed between local Ukrainian republican authorities and those in the RSFSR, as Ukraine sought to promote itself as the homeland for all Ukrainians of the Soviet Union and to absorb parts of the RSFSR that had Ukrainian ethnic majorities, such as the Kuban region.

And so, within a very few years, the Affirmative Action model bore fruit, but it had also made enemies. Many Bolsheviks feared that korenizatsia was fostering national identity politics rather than defusing them, that it accorded excessive influence to the nationalist intellectuals who had been co-opted to implement it, and that it encouraged discrimination against Russians. With the onset of the First Five-Year Plan and the cultural revolution in 1929, they expected korenizatsia to be replaced with efforts to create a unified Soviet nationality instead. However, Stalin rejected this idea and continued to defend the policy, both publicly and privately.

The turning point came during the 1932 grain requisitions crisis. Using previously secret documents, including extensive correspondence between Stalin and L. M. Ka-