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USSR at 100: Lessons of the Soviet of Nationalities

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Special stamps issued by the Donetsk People’s Republic to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Soviet Union’s founding. Each stamp represents one of the 15 Soviet republics. Graphic: Post of Donbass

Dec. 30 marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922, the first attempt in history to build a multinational socialist society. Although the USSR was destroyed by a U.S.-backed counterrevolution in the early 1990s, its groundbreaking achievements still hold important lessons for the global working class and oppressed peoples.

This piece by Sam Marcy, one of the foremost Marxist thinkers and fighters of the second half of the 20th century, was originally published in 1988 as “The Structure

of the Soviet State” and included as chapter 16 of [“Perestroika: A Marxist Critique.”](#)

How imperialists switched tactics in regard to Soviet nationalities

The attitude of the ruling classes of the capitalist countries with regard to the national question in Russia underwent an extraordinary change when the Bolshevik Revolution triumphed in 1917.

At first the international bourgeoisie attempted to malign the new republic by proclaiming that the revolutionary leaders, in particular the members of the Executive Committee of the Soviets, were not really representative of Russia. Dzerzhinsky was a Pole, Stalin was a Georgian, Trotsky was a Jew, other leaders were Ukrainian, Armenian and so on. It was the same tactic they used to bait communists in this country when the left movement had many members and leaders who were Jewish, Black or foreign-born.

However, as the revolution progressed, and as Soviet power took hold over larger and larger sections of the country, sweeping all the provinces and nationalities within its fold, it became clear that it was an all-national revolution. The international bourgeoisie thereafter took another tack and began to malign the USSR in a new way. Now it was said that the Great Russians were oppressing all the other nationalities.

Next came a long silence about the revolutionary role of the formerly oppressed nationalities in the formation of the Soviet Union and particularly in the Bolshevik leadership. Researchers in the recent period seem to have had difficulty finding out what role, if any, the formerly oppressed peoples had in the Bolshevik Revolution. This tendentiousness of the imperialist bourgeoisie and their silence on the role of oppressed nationalities in the Bolshevik Revolution finally attracted the attention of at least one researcher, Andrew Ezergailis, who felt impelled to write a book about it.

This book does more than just describe the role of the Latvians in their own revolution. It puts forth the view that a division of Latvian soldiers not only aided the Bolshevik Revolution and won significant battles, such as the Battle of Rostov, the Battle of Archangel and the Battle of Rogachov, but it virtually saved the Soviet Republic from a counterrevolutionary insurrection in Petrograd in 1918.

Even if one regards this view – that one division saved the republic – as somewhat far-fetched, his book nevertheless has the great merit of putting before the U.S. public the revolutionary role of at least one of the constituent republics of the USSR. This could interest the reader to see how many other republics were formidable pillars in erecting and sustaining the Soviet Union, not only in its early days but also in the Second World War.

Planned economy requires voluntary association of equal nations

If it is true that the construction of a socialist society is impossible without a planned economy, it is equally true that a planned economy is impossible in a multinational country without the equality of all the nations and their free, voluntary association within the framework of a union of all the socialist republics. It was precisely to this question that Lenin devoted the last days of his life.

How could the interests of a planned economy be reconciled with the apparently contradictory need for the equality of all the nationalities in the USSR? What kind of a state structure should be developed to give full vent to the workers and peasants and conform to the revolutionary reconstitution of Soviet society as it emerged from the overthrow of the czarist autocracy and the sweeping away of the bourgeoisie and the landlords?

At first, the Bolsheviks raised the slogan, “All power to the Soviets!” And, indeed, power was fully taken by the First Congress of the Soviets of Workers, Peasants and Soldiers Deputies. When the Congress of Soviets was not in session, the Executive

Committee of the Soviets carried out the functions of the Congress.

In 1918 this slogan was translated into the celebrated decree, the “Declaration of Rights of the Working and Exploited People,” which embodied the fundamental state program and structure of the USSR. The leading ideological and political role taken by the Communist Party was the central factor in making the Soviets a living reflection of the interests of the exploited and oppressed masses of Russia.

Transition from Congress of Soviets to union of equal republics

While the Congress of Soviets was revolutionary in form as well as in content, it still had some inadequacies. The problem of how to perfect the state structure covered many weeks and months of discussion, both during the periods of relative peace as well as during the war of imperialist intervention and the civil war. It was not until 1922-23 that the new structure of the USSR was to emerge, after intense if not heated discussions.

This structure was the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and it differs from that of any capitalist government in two fundamental ways.

In the first place, it is based not on the landlords and capitalists, not on the existence of private property in the means of production, not on wage labor employed by private enterprise, but on a new social system where the means of production are socially owned and the economy is planned. Bourgeois politicians, ideologues and philosophers will accede to that much, at least in the formal sense, although they completely deny the validity of socialism or go on to exaggerate its defects and shortcomings to the extent that the USSR is depicted as totally devoid of any significant progressive social and political features.

There is another feature of the state structure of the USSR which is just as fundamental, yet the bourgeois ideologues and their myriads of apologists and

historians rarely refer to it. It is even neglected in much of the progressive and radical literature of the workers' movement. To understand this second feature, it would be helpful to first look at the innumerable capitalist state structures, whether their form be democratic, monarchical, military or even fascist.

The most democratic form of the capitalist state may be unicameral, that is, having one body which enacts all legislation, plus an executive arm of the government. Or, as in the United States, it can have two legislative bodies, such as the House of Representatives and the Senate. However, not one of the capitalist governments, whatever its constitution may be, has an arm built into the framework of the state to deal with the national question and make sure that the nationalities within the country are represented in all important decisions.

There may be references in the constitution to equal protection of the law, due process, and so on. There may be special legislation regarding civil rights. There may be this or that agency dealing with complaints or enforcement. But there is no specific arm within the constitutional structure of any capitalist state which deals specifically with the question of nationalities. This differentiates the USSR from all the capitalist countries.

USSR's bicameral system and the Soviet of Nationalities

From the point of view of its external characteristics, the USSR has this in common with some of the capitalist states: it has a bicameral system. In this sense, it seems like the U.S., but the two arms of its legislative structure are very different from the two houses of Congress here.

This bicameral system is found in the highest governing body, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, which consists of the Soviet of the Union and the Soviet of Nationalities. The Soviet of the Union is chosen on the basis of proportional representation - each deputy represents an equal amount of people. In the Soviet of Nationalities, each

nationality is guaranteed a set number of deputies.

The members of both chambers serve equal terms, and no bill can become law unless adopted by a majority of both chambers. This all-important second arm is of extraordinary significance, particularly in the epoch of imperialism, in which national oppression is a characteristic feature. It is the kind of structure which, if incorporated into a bourgeois state, would tremendously assist the struggle of the oppressed nationalities against the dominant nationality.

In constructing this mechanism for governing, the Soviet Union accorded recognition to the existence of nationalities in a revolutionary way which had never been done before. It created an equality between the two chambers, one based on representation according to the proportion of the population, the other on guaranteed representation for every nationality. In this way, not only the general interests of the working class are reflected, but also the very special and important interests of all nationalities.

These structures are defined under the Constitution of the USSR. Chapter XV, Article 109 says:

The Supreme Soviet of the USSR shall consist of two chambers: the Soviet of the Union and the Soviet of Nationalities. The two chambers of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR shall have equal rights.

Article 110 says: The Soviet of the Union and the Soviet of Nationalities shall have equal numbers of deputies. The Soviet of the Union shall be elected by constituencies with equal population. The Soviet of Nationalities shall be elected on the basis of the following representation: 32 deputies from each Union Republic, 11 deputies from each Autonomous Republic, five deputies from each Autonomous Region, and one deputy from each Autonomous Area.

The voting age in the USSR is 18, and was so long before it was ever lowered here. Of course, voting there is irrespective of race, nationality, religion, gender and property rights.

It should be remembered that the U.S. Constitution, while it contained no language about qualifications for voting, allowed the states to limit voting to the landowners, bankers, merchants and capitalists. Only property owners could vote. Women, Black and Native people and indentured servants were all deprived of the right to vote. And even after many of these restrictions were lifted, there were poll taxes, literacy requirements and complicated registration forms. Women got the right to vote only in 1919, and the Equal Rights Amendment has still not been adopted to this very day.

In addition to according universal suffrage, the Soviet Constitution gives greater representation to the various nationalities, making it possible for even the smallest of the republics to have additional leverage over and above its proportion in the population. The Soviet of Nationalities was designed to overcome the predominance of the large nations and give additional weight to the smaller ones.

U.S. 'democracy' and the case of Puerto Rico

Is there a constitution anywhere in the bourgeois world that even bears a resemblance to such an effort as that incorporated in the Soviet state structure? The significance of the chamber of nationalities is completely overlooked elsewhere, precisely because of the racist and chauvinist character of the imperialist countries.

When in July 1988 the Democratic Convention nominated Dukakis and Bentsen, there was a great deal of oratory on prime-time television and the capitalist media boasted about how democratically the meeting was conducted. But completely unnoticed was that while there was a delegation from Puerto Rico participating in the "democratic process," the people of Puerto Rico have no representation in the

Congress of the U.S.

Would even one politician get up and object to the fact that the people of Puerto Rico, even though they are considered citizens and are subject to be drafted into the U.S. Army, cannot vote in congressional elections? Nor are they allowed to secede and declare themselves an independent republic. The same could be said for Samoa and Guam.

Notwithstanding the vigorous support of a whole host of countries, a resolution supporting the self-determination of Puerto Rico has been pigeonholed in the Decolonization Committee of the United Nations for years and years. The U.S. makes absolutely sure that it rarely sees the light of day, even though most of the countries in the U.N. regard Puerto Rico as a U.S. colony that should by right be independent.

Self-determination part of Soviet constitution

Of course, there is nothing in the U.S. Constitution or its amendments on the right of nations to self-determination. The USSR, on the other hand, has a specific constitutional provision which not only guarantees the right of its constituent nations to self-determination, but also specifies the unequivocal right to secede.

Thus, in considering the national question in the USSR, it is very important to contrast it with the imperialist countries. The comparison shows the tremendous amount of progress made by the USSR and the truly revolutionary structure it has developed. It stands head and shoulders above any capitalist government.

While a great deal of literature can be found describing the social character of the USSR, little of it deals with the structure of the state, particularly as it pertains to the Soviet of Nationalities, the arm which oppressed peoples throughout the world would be most concerned with.

The English historian E.H. Carr, in his three-volume work on the USSR, went into

considerable detail on the formation of the USSR and the union republics, but without illuminating the nature of the struggle within the USSR over the relationship of a planned economy to the equality of nations. Even where he does occasionally refer to the bicameral system of government, he never once mentions what a revolutionary departure this was.

He had a good reason for avoiding any comparison with, say, the English system of parliamentary government. There he would have to refer to the existence of such an honorific cabinet post as the Colonial Secretary, the superintendent of imprisoned colonial peoples. Or, for that matter, the existence of the Prince of Wales, who is not a person from Wales but a member of the hereditary English bourgeois monarchy. Not to speak of Britain's role in Ireland.

The objective of constructing the Soviet of Nationalities as one of the bicameral arms of the Soviet government was not to divide the nationalities but to strengthen proletarian class solidarity and to unite the mass of the people in the struggle for socialism on the basis of the equality of all nations.

All this notwithstanding, it is especially important in light of the centrifugal forces of national sovereignty to consider the planning principles of a socialist country. How was it possible, for instance, to construct a five-year plan while guaranteeing the equality and sovereignty of the union republics, the autonomous republics, the autonomous regions and the national districts?

Relation between planning and national sovereignty

One gets a measure of the problem if one considers the complexity of carrying out a vast, comprehensive plan of economic and industrial development on the basis of achieving the agreement of the various nationalities of the USSR.

Of course, it is conceivable that it could all get done by administrative measures,

while riding roughshod over the heads of the nationalities, that is, over the mass of the people. There are few historians or analysts of the USSR in the West who venture to explain the intricacies of achieving a five-year plan without the tumult, disorder and rebellion which would accompany a capitalist government's attempt to carry out a plan, were it to embark on one.

The history of capitalist expansion in the U.S., for instance, shows that even the development of a transcontinental railroad was accompanied by the worst corruption and bribery, the use of virtual slave labor of Asian people, an onslaught against the Native peoples, and skullduggery in forcing or tricking independent small farmers to sell their land cheap. It's a history full of crime.

Or what about opening up the criminal files held by the city of San Francisco in its famous indictment and ultimate conviction of General Motors? These show that, in order to expand automobile use on a national basis, GM tried to destroy San Francisco's trolley car system and other forms of transport in many other cities.

For all the high-handed and command methods that were employed in the USSR, especially during the Stalin era, it nevertheless was a truly historic achievement that such widespread industrialization could be carried out at all in a country with over 100 nationalities.

At first, many of the territories held under the former czarist autocracy were amalgamated, so that in 1923 there were only four union republics. Today, however, there are 15 union republics, 20 autonomous republics, eight autonomous regions and 10 national areas. What this signifies is the greater attention given to each nationality. Further demarcations, not only geographical but cultural, helped social as well as economic development.

Genuine socialist construction, by its very nature, tends to unite not only the working class, not only the exploited masses, but the people of all nationalities. It

must nevertheless be recognized that there is an inherent contradiction between the economic tasks of socialism, which demand centralization, and the needs of the nationalities to develop their culture, language, etc. on the basis of equality.

It is for this very reason that the Soviet of Nationalities was constructed. It was conceived not as a ceremonial institution but as an effective and functioning one, where all the nationalities could express their needs and their aspirations more fully than in any other institution. However, there are significant defects and shortcomings in how all this has been carried out, which we have analyzed in our articles on Kazakhstan, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the Baltic republics.

Need to harmonize contradictory forces through democratic centralism

Perestroika, or restructuring, which General Secretary Gorbachev has characterized as a qualitative turn to rebuild the whole country, necessarily will affect the nationalities. The enormous restructuring envisioned calls for a vast scientific and technological revolution in the industrial structure of the USSR. Such a plan cannot be effectuated without the most scrupulous attention to the national question.

As has been demonstrated, first by the Alma-Ata rebellion in Kazakhstan and later in Azerbaijan and Armenia, the economic reforms have influenced and encouraged the disorders. One might be tempted to ascribe this to the peculiarities of these republics, which historically were less developed. This, however, is a spurious argument and is totally without foundation. This is shown by the disorders in the Baltic republics - Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia - at the other end of the USSR, which historically have been more industrially and technologically advanced.

In loosening centralized control of the economy, the restructuring has encouraged many national aspirations to surface, while at the same time giving a freer rein to bourgeois trends which accentuate privilege and inequality.

We have shown that while the reforms are moving to decentralize the economy, there has been a tightening of the reins in terms of political control by the center over the nationalities. In Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Latvia, party leaders were removed from their posts in a way that offended the sensibilities of these nationalities.

Notwithstanding the fact that there are pro-imperialist tendencies in the Baltic states, all the more must their national rights be scrupulously observed.

It must be noted that there is an inherent contradiction between the centripetal needs of socialist planning and the centrifugal forces contained in greater national sovereignty. These forces have to be harmonized and unified on the basis of socialist centralism in the economy and socialist democracy in the center's dealing with the nationalities.

Of course, democratic centralism is an indispensable ingredient in all relationships in the USSR, but the area that needs particular sensitivity, and to which Lenin referred again and again, particularly during the last days of his life, is the national question.

The historic significance of the 12th Congress of the Communist Party held in April 1923 is that it recognized the necessity of a firm and continuing struggle against "the relics of great-power chauvinism" and urged a consistent struggle against the economic and cultural inequality of the nationalities within the Soviet Union. It also called for a struggle against the relics of nationalism of all kinds, but the emphasis was on eradicating the heavy legacy of czarist oppression. All this may be regarded as part of a history more than six decades old, decades of stupendous economic, social and political development.

Nevertheless, certain aspects of the national question have to be reviewed in light of the contemporary situation. It is impossible to avoid the question if one is to take

seriously the resolutions on restructuring of the 27th Congress of the CPSU and of the 19th Party Conference in June 1988.

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