

# STALIN'S CONCEPT OF NATION

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Stalin's concept of *nation* is expressed in his essay from 1913 *Marxism and the National Question*.<sup>1</sup> Due to the subsequent career of the author, the concept was to have a profound influence on the shaping of Soviet nationality policies.

In the intellectual life of the Soviet Union Stalin's nation-concept has been fundamental. In the 1960's nationality problems were discussed on the Stalinist basis, and so far the Soviet authorities have not put forth new ways of thinking in the area of nationality policies, as recent developments show.

According to Stalin a nation is an historically evolved, stable community — concerning language, territory, economic life and mental character expressing itself as a common culture. Only when all four characteristics are present is it possible to talk about a nation.<sup>2</sup>

Nationality, therefore, can be defined from four questions: What language, what territory, what market and what national character? The answering of these questions will provide for an "objective" definition of any individual's national belonging. Consequently, the individual needs not be asked about his or her actual preferences, the "subjective" element thus being eliminated from the concept.

However, any "objective", universal definition is likely to be problematic. Let me give some examples to elucidate Stalin's four parameters: What were the differences between the Serbian and the Croatian, or the Turkestani people's languages? Where was the boundary between Armenia and Azerbaijan? Where was the Polish market in 1913? What was the difference between the Turkmenian and the Uzbeki national character, or between the Finnish and the Karelian?

Any partition of the tsarist or the Austro-Hungarian empires after Stalin's directions would be impossible without one or another nation being able to claim parts of other nations' territories referring to some national "right", justified by Stalin's nation-concept.

Stalin's concept goes beyond the pure definition of *nation*. He also gives a historically grounded explanation of the rise of nations. According to Stalin, nations evolve in the historical process in which feudalism is liquidated and capitalism is forged.<sup>3</sup>

In the Western part of Europe, where capitalism had broken through, the foundation of nations had led to their simultaneous transformation into nation-states. This was not the case in the Eastern parts of Europe, where the weaker capitalist development had created nations, but not yet nation-states. In Eastern Europe, the bourgeoisies of the various nations now were competing desperately for control and extension of their respective markets. Stalin compares these markets to the first school, where the bourgeoisie learns its nationalism.<sup>4</sup>

The struggle for markets was being fought on the political scene too. In alliance with ruling elites varying measures against the competitors were taken in the form of national reprisals. These retaliatory measures affected the masses too, thus creating fertile soil for the national demands of the retaliated bourgeoisie. In this way the national movements were started as products of national suppression.

Therefore, for Stalin the “national problem” becomes a bourgeois phenomena, historically rooted in the era of capitalism. As this era was doomed to destruction, according to marxist theory, Stalin maintained that the contemporary development of mankind showed that the national ties were not tightening but were getting looser, falling to the ground. Time did not prove this statement to be true, as the World War I was to show; but then again, it's easy to be wise after the events.

Anyway, Stalin's historical framework implies, that nations had a built-in drive for state-ness, determined by the logic of capitalist development. A precondition for state-ness would be some sort of territorial unity. Thus the territorial national right to self-determination became a logic way in which to answer the “national question”. To Stalin, the right of self-determination meant, that a nation could organize itself as it wanted, that a nation had a right to go into federation with other nations, and that a nation had a right to complete separation. Moreover, nations were seen as sovereign and entirely equal.<sup>5</sup>

To this one might ask: Did Stalin thereby mean, that the Russian nation had a right to separate from the tsarist empire? Or from the Soviet Union, if it came to that? Stalin's historical framework and his version of the right to self-determination was far from perfect. He treated nationalism only as a phenomenon, relevant to oppressed national minorities. In Stalin's way of thinking, Russian or French nationalism was not understandable.

We have seen, that Stalin's concept of “nation” had two components: One was a definition of “nation,” the other was an historical analysis. The definition seems at best inconvenient, and the historical analysis at best incomplete. Despite these shortcomings, Stalin's concept has lived on in the Soviet Union for a long time, no alternative seems to have broken through. How come?

Perhaps we should understand Stalin's concept of “nation” in another way. The concept appears as a description of historical realities. But what if we suggest, that the concept has been used instead as a programme for changing the historical realities? What if we saw Soviet history as an attempt to transform the old, multinational tsarist empire into a modern nation-state?

In this perspective we can read Stalin's nation-concept as outlining the new Soviet-nation: *The nation is a historically evolved, stable community* — historically evolved through the revolution and through the civil war, stabilized by the so-called democratic centralism of the Party and by the structure of the Soviet-state — *concerning language* — the Russian — *territory* - the realm of the tsarist empire, give or take a little — *economic life* - five-year plans, infrastructure and

public ownership of the means of production — *and mental character, expressing itself as a common culture* — namely proletarian internationalism and Soviet Patriotism, the latter meaning affection for the common Soviet state, not to be mistaken for narrow-minded, ethnocentric love for one's own nation.

Soviet policies, especially Soviet nationality policies, perhaps become more understandable from this viewpoint, underlining the nation-building perspective, than from the official viewpoint of declared internationalist principles expressed by the Soviet authorities.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency in western, especially North-American research, to evaluate Soviet nationality policies from the explicit marxist-leninist ideology of the regime itself. In particular, Lenin's theory of self-determination has served as a starting-point. Pursuing along these lines, the scholars are able to expose the Soviet authorities to a proper criticism, but they do not get far in the way of understanding what actually happened.<sup>6</sup>

But not only scholars risk to be caught in the webs of ideology. With the loosening of the communist grip on Eastern Europe and the simultaneously increasing integration of the Western European nations into the EEC and the immigration to Western Europe of people from other parts of the world, expressions of national awareness flourish again. How do these people think? Do they want national justification and satisfaction on historical grounds? Do they make national demands by reason of language, territory, economy or culture? If they do so, their line of argument is not so far from Stalin's, although, of course, their objectives and ways of behaviour might be entirely different from his.<sup>7</sup> However, a solution to contemporary national problems satisfying such demands might be hard to find.

An alternative line of thought can be found in the works of the Austrian social democrats Otto Bauer (1882–1938) and Karl Renner (1870–1950). Before World War I they outlined a model for extra-territorial national cultural autonomy. The inhabitants of the Austro-Hungarian empire should be able to join the nation, they felt affiliated to, independent of their place of living. *"The subjects (...) would possess the right to administrate their cultural affairs autonomously as one body, regardless of where they happened to reside. Control over the affairs of each nation would be exercised by elective organs which would be given the right to tax their subjects. (...) Coexistent with the extra-territorial organs of cultural autonomy, Bauer and Renner envisaged an elaborate system of territorial organs of administration, partly to take care of political problems which were not connected with nationality questions, and partly to protect the organs of cultural autonomy from encroachments by the central government."*<sup>8</sup>

Bauer and Renner's thoughts are rooted in another concept of *nation* than Stalin's. The concept of the two Austrians emphasized the "subjective" components of nationality: They underlined will, solidarity, and feeling in the population, and put forth as a criterion for nationality the free choice of the subjects rather than "objective" parameters to be judged by commissaries or other authorities. Their ideas, however, seem difficult to carry through, but as an intellectual starting-point, they might help us develop more refined and tolerant ways of thinking than the ones, we have inherited from Stalin and other nationbuilders.

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1. The essay was first published as *The National Question and Social Democracy* in a party journal 1913. In Stalin's *Sochineniya*, ii, pp290-367 it bears the title *Marxism and the National Question*. For a translation into English see J. Stalin: *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question* (2nd. ed. 1936, pp 3-61). References here are to the Danish Version from 1939.
  2. Stalin(1913) p. 12.
  3. Stalin(1913) p. 17.
  4. Stalin(1913) p. 19.
  5. Stalin(1913) p. 22.
  6. This tendency is especially marked in the listed works of Connor, Pipes and the Austrian-born Low.
  7. To avoid misunderstandings: I am in no way accusing nationally minded people or movements to be Stalinists, I am only trying to compare patterns of thinking.
  8. Pipes(1964) p. 28.