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The Unmeltable Russians

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Russians are now one of the national minorities of the USSR. In 1969 or 1970 the non-Russian birthrate, together with a fillip of immigration of Muslims across the Sinkiang border, finally tipped the balance, and the Great Russians became, not the majority nationality, but the plurality nationality with less than 50 per cent of the population. In statistical terms, at least, the problem of nationalities within the USSR, far from being solved, has become more acute. To be sure, the Russians are still the leaders in the population statistics and, of greater importance, they seem to maintain absolute command of the economy, all the while their culture is growing more and more dominant. But the problem of national minorities remains acute, and the USSR is by no means compa-

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rable to, say, East Germany with its enclaves like the Sorbs, the Canadians with their Doukhobors in Saskatchewan, or even the U.S. with its Cubans in Miami.

The USSR is an empire. The political and social entity that occupies one-sixth of the globe simply does not conform to the nineteenth-century concept of "nation." In view of its vastness, its complexity of national, linguistic and cultural structure, and its assertion of the Russian people and their ways over those less favored, it is misleading to consider the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics a nation. Indeed, in many ways the Soviets seem determined to prove the validity of *plus ça change, plus la même chose*. For if the czarist structure which the Bolsheviks replaced was correct in calling itself the Russian Empire, the Soviets would be no less correct—and rather more candid—if they embraced the term themselves. The imperial designs of the czars have in fact been

refined and expanded in the fifty-six years since the last formal abdication in Russia.

Like the czarist empire before it, the USSR displays no facility for acquiring overseas possessions and thus cannot really qualify as a quintessential example of empires in the tradition prevailing since Henry the Navigator. The USSR *does* possess client states and devotes endless energy to their care and feeding. Soviet efforts to woo the Arabs provide an obvious example. Then too there are the recent overtures to India. And of course Cuba, an economic and ideological thorn in the flesh for which not even God's grace seems sufficient. Such international activities, however, could be called imperialistic only by a Marxist ideologue; in fact, these relations with client states are not a symptom of the disease of empire, for all nations (save only the hopelessly backward, such as Switzerland) strive for such relations and spheres of influence.

The same cannot be said for the contiguous domains of the USSR: From its beginning the USSR has sought to expand its control in any direction possible, preferably by extending its boundaries to embrace areas immediately adjacent to the erstwhile Soviet border, or else by establishing a system of satrapies when direct absorption is infeasible. Direct acquisition of territory was an unmasked motivation during the postrevolutionary civil war, when great tracts of land, whose inhabitants thought they had at long last slipped out from under the yoke of the Russian Empire (e.g., the Muslim territories and most of the Ukraine), fell to the Red Army. Armenia, staggering from the Turkish massacres, welcomed the opportunity to be Soviet rather than Turkish (and dead) in a maneuver which history has proven to be the opposite of a leap from the frying pan into the fire. In 1923 some of the Buddhist nationalities realized their long unsought aspiration to become a part of the homeland of socialism. Two decades of digestion followed, aided by the emetics and occasional purgatives of Stalin's nationalities policy. When Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were added to what had formerly been Eastern Poland, the passion for extending boundaries seemed satisfied. Since then the USSR has contented itself with trying to manage the problems of domestic nationalities without adding further ingredients to the pot.

Expansion of the areas politically separate but under the direct control of the USSR has been accomplished in a similar way. By the mid-twenties it was apparent that Mongolia was independent in name only, and its inability to deviate significantly from Soviet policies was a precursor of the experience of Eastern Europe during and after World War II. Poland, East Germany, Rumania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Albania and, belatedly, Czechoslovakia were received into the family, and Soviet control of their destinies threatened to be far more effectual than that of the U.S. over the Philippines, Guam or

even Puerto Rico. The process spread eastward as well, with China and North Korea enlisting in the Soviet family of nations before the decade was out. To the south, the Soviet empire failed to embrace Iran and Greece, but not for want of trying.

This vast, new domain was far from stable. Yugoslavia managed to slip out from under Soviet control before the empire was even done abuilding, creating for itself an ambiguous position neither in nor out of the Soviet orbit. China, if it ever was under Russian control, had managed to cut loose by the late fifties, a defection so traumatic to the Soviet leadership that they tried until 1963 to pretend it had not happened. As if her own defection were not sufficient, China had the dubious benefit of taking Albania along, and for a while in the 1960's it looked as though Rumania might do likewise. North Korea, with its strange geographical location, maintains a relationship to the USSR which is inexplicable to the West and, one suspects, to the Soviets themselves. And North Vietnam, which is contiguous not to the USSR but to China, seems to want to have it both ways; thus far at least, courtship by two beaux (three, if the Marshall Plan East materializes) is preferable to marriage to any one.

Even within the domains undisputedly controlled by the Soviet empire problems persist. The trauma of Stalin's death was followed by a rash of rioting and instability in East Germany and Poland, culminating in the latter-day Sepoy Mutiny in Hungary, which had to be quelled by Soviet redcoats. A dozen years later, in 1968, the Czechs tried their hand at the same business, with similar results. During this second postwar invasion of Eastern Europe, the Soviets, loath to admit that their interests were imperial, coined the unoriginal term "commonwealth" (*sodruzhestvo*). But this semantic maneuver indicated no decline of imperial ambitions; the term commonwealth should not be confused with its use by the British following the dismantling of their empire.

Within the USSR, the problems inherent in managing the multinational state are simply astonishing. As before, the Russians are firmly in control; among equal nationalities they are the most equal. The new majority, however, is composed not of Great Russians but of a congeries of greater or lesser nationalities. The USSR boasts, in addition to Russian, more than 88 recognized national languages. The 134 minority nationalities range from peoples so similar to the Great Russians that they themselves often are hard put to find a detectable difference—the Byelorussians, for one—to smaller or larger tribes like the Chechen-Ingush, who have no more relationship to the Russians than do the Aucas to the grandees of São Paolo. Many of the national minorities of the USSR, such as the Armenians and Georgians, live their own life-styles with hardly a backward glance at ukases and complaints from

Moscow; many more, such as the Baltic peoples, would like to do so. Some of the constituent peoples of the USSR, such as the Lithuanians, enjoy a national history no less venerable than that of Russia, and others, such as the Cossacks, have a tradition of freedom which only the czars could terminate; still others, the Ukrainians and Byelorussians, for example, can cherish only an indefatigable desire to national independence despite the fact that never in history have they known independence.

The resulting mix is somewhere between melting pot and seething cauldron. Many of the minority peoples—perhaps the majority among some of them—are somewhat bored with the whole business, consider themselves Soviet first and Ukrainian or Byelorussian only incidentally, and are mystified and annoyed by the firebrands for whom national independence is the consuming issue. Many others consider themselves Tadjik or Kirghiz first and Soviet only incidentally, and are mystified and annoyed by the ineffectual attempts of the Russians to assert their authority.

The nationalities problem is further exacerbated by religion. With the exception of a few peoples whose differences from the dominant Great Russians are comparatively blurred (the Byelorussians and, perhaps, the Ukrainians), the more distinct national minorities are religiously disparate from the Russians. *Cuius natio, eius religio*, and a great many of the minority religions are practically coterminous with the national minorities they serve. Lithuanians are not only Lithuanians, they are Catholics. Estonians are Lutherans, as are Latvians (unless they are Catholics). Armenians or Georgians are also Armenian and Georgian Orthodox. And the great numbers of Turkic nationalities of Soviet Central Asia are Muslim to a man. Even the Buryats, when Soviet antireligious zeal had erased institutional Buddhism, either remained Buddhist individually or reverted to a shamanism which is certainly as far from Russian Orthodoxy as are their preferred practices imported from the Tibetan lamas. The Jews enjoy most of the disabilities and almost none of the perquisites offered by Soviet nationalities and religious policy. They are victims of additional harassment from Soviet cultural policy thrown in for good measure. In short, the non-Russian distinctiveness of the minority peoples in the USSR is all-embracing, including history, tradition, mores, social practices and religion.

Since the earliest days of Stalinism, the Soviet answer to the nationalities problem has been a curious slogan, "Socialist in Content, Nationalist in Form." It quickly became apparent, however, that this slogan was no policy at all, but as meaningless in practice as in logic. Maxim Gorky wrote:

Each tribe is the source of innumerable possibilities for the enriching of life with the energy of

the spirit, and it is indispensable for the sake of a faster growth of world culture that this energy should develop normally, flow into life—to our happiness and joy—in conditions of maximum freedom.

But poets laureate seldom determine policy, and Gorky's paean was largely irrelevant. Lenin proclaimed:

The fundamental interest of proletarian solidarity, and consequently of the proletarian class struggle, requires that we never adopt a formal attitude to the national question, but always take into account the specific attitude of the proletarian of the oppressed (or small) nation towards the oppressor (or great) nation.

But Lenin died in 1923. The Constitution of the USSR declares the right of republics to secede from the union, but it took no firing on Fort Sumter to demonstrate the inadvisability of trying to exercise the right.

Stalin, whatever else he may have been, was a practical man, and he early understood that to grant to the nationalities the right of secession, or any lesser form of independence from Moscow, would not work, but would open a Pandora's box of fissiparous disintegration. Stalin may not have considered his religious upbringing (he was a theological student in his youth, after all), but the briefest glance at Church history demonstrates that once schism has occurred, further schism inevitably follows. To allow growth of a national consciousness among the minorities would threaten the USSR with complete dissolution. Stalin, a convert to the Russian nation, understood better than most the need to damp the fires of national particularism, even among his own native Georgians.

Stalin's policy, continued by his successors, was to suppress national consciousness by whatever means necessary (or possible). Minority nationalists were arrested, non-Russian languages and cultures were banned, and entire peoples were dispersed and exiled to inhospitable climes. (Stalin himself admitted that the only reason the Ukrainians did not experience this last fate was that there were too many of them.) His successors have not had recourse to such Draconian measures, but they have been quick to react when nationalist sentiment has broken out from the exceedingly narrow confines permitted it by the leadership. Particularly with the escalation of dissent since the mid-sixties, Ukrainian nationalists have been arrested, Lithuanian Catholics have joined them in the march to Moldavia, and the Crimean Tatars escaped being sent into exile only because they affixed so many signatures to their protests—120,000 on one of them—that it was impractical to arrest them all. The boldness of the dissatisfied minorities has increased during the past ten years, as has the intensity of the state's reaction.

The Soviet leadership is not content merely to continue forcible repression indefinitely. Such repression is a temporary, stopgap solution to the nationalities problem. More and more it becomes apparent that their hopes ride, not on the stick of suppression, but on the carrot of assimilation. Primarily through control of tangible, economic rewards, the USSR is appealing to the self-interest of its individual citizens in offering creature comforts to those who accept the establishment culture, Russian-oriented through and through. Professional advancement and a rise in economic well-being are made contingent on abandonment of native ways, on developing proficiency in the Russian language and on wholehearted acceptance of Soviet life as defined by the center. The process is far from complete, but assimilation has enjoyed sufficient success to become a *bête noir* of the firebrands of nationalism; almost to a man, ardent nationalists plead vehemently with their fellows to rise up against the Good Life before it is too late and their national identity is swallowed up in the great sea of Russian red.*

Other countries, particularly the United States, have demonstrated how effective assimilation can be in dissolving national minorities. In the USSR the process is already far advanced among some of the minor nationalities—Byelorussians and, to a lesser extent, Ukrainians. But it is far from complete. The Soviet state has not yet fully freed itself from the economic medievalism of gigantomania, and the military's huge appetite is not sated. The country as a whole is far from wealthy enough to effect immediate dissolution of its national minorities through economic bribery. Great care is taken to maintain the standard of living at as low a level as possible for those who are not yet assimilated, so that the economic imbalance will serve as an incentive for abandonment of national nonconformity. Meanwhile, force will be used to prevent centrifugal tendencies of nationalism from disintegrating the society; the resulting tension is accepted as the price to be paid until assimilation has had time to do its work.

If it seems fairly evident that the unrest of Soviet nationalities does not enhance the global prospects for peace, neither does the unrest seem to be a direct liability to peace. For all the relative poverty of the non-Russian nationalities of the USSR, it is difficult to imagine that 121,000,000 non-Russians who have no access to weapons can long prevail over 119,000,000 Russians who do.

In Eastern Europe economic injustices perpetrated by the USSR can certainly result in uprisings and intervention by Soviet arms, but it is hardly likely that such discomforts within the Soviet realm will escalate into war. Budapest demonstrated and Prague confirmed that the West respects the right of

the USSR to do more or less what it wants with its allies; an unspoken Monroe Doctrine is in effect, and the chances of the West becoming embroiled in any conceivable future eruptions in Eastern Europe seem exceedingly remote.

The idea that disturbances among the minority nationalities within the USSR should attract outside intervention is even more implausible. The Soviet state has demonstrated time and again, and in periods of much greater unrest than these, that pitchforks and clubs are no match for tanks and automatic weapons—as during the “Walking-stick War” (one of the collectivization riots in 1928-32), for example. Nationalist uprisings within the USSR may prove to be nasty and brutish, but they will not attract outside support. Thus the nationalities problem in the USSR probably constitutes no *direct* threat to world peace.

One cannot be so confident, however, about the *indirect* threat to peace. The nationalities problem is a source of grave unrest in the USSR and, as such, might indirectly have a bearing on Soviet actions in the international arena. Political scientists have not yet ruled on the connection between internal instability and war, but a case could be made that internal unrest has led directly to armed aggression. The social confusion of the French Revolution paved the way for Napoleon, and in Germany the Great Depression was followed by Hitler. On a lesser scale, China was anything but stable internally when it entered the Korean conflict, and neither of the Vietnams has enjoyed internal tranquility since World War II. If the unrest of the national minorities in the USSR creates a sufficient level of tension within Soviet society, there is historical precedent to support the possibility that it might force a deviation in Soviet international actions from that fine line of conduct on which international order and peace is currently premised.

Individually or as a group, political leaders whose attention is diverted by internal problems can make grave mistakes internationally, as witness decisions made by U.S. leadership during the course of the Vietnam war. If war is defined as the epitome of irrationality, then it may be that anything causing internal tension may pose a danger, proximate or remote, to global peace. The unsolved problems of minority nationalities within the USSR cannot be dismissed out of hand. No less than the Soviet leaders themselves, we might do well, in pursuing the goal of world peace, to maintain at least an awareness of this facet of contemporary Soviet reality.

* For a brief period at the end of the sixties counter-protests from Great Russians appeared, inveighing against the mongrelization of the Russian race attendant upon assimilation of non-Russian nationalities.