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The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939

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Raymond Pearson

Weighing in at over five hundred pages, this formidable work of scholarship investigates the fifteen-year evolution of the Soviet Union's strategy towards its multi-ethnic jurisdiction from the 'Lenin Constitution' of 1923 through to the consolidation of the 'Stalin Constitution' of 1936. The touchstone of such a complex and convoluted topic is the principle of what is now termed 'affirmative action': received wisdom holds that the Soviet Union adopted 'korenizatsiia' or 'indigenisation' in the 1920s as "a prophylactic policy designed to defuse and prevent the development of nationalism" (p. 126) by simultaneously favouring the minority non-Russian nationalities and penalising the majority Russian nation. In the course of the 1930s, however, affirmative action was abandoned and then reversed, initially as a 'Great Retreat' and most calamitously in a 'Great Terror' which reasserted Russian dominance and victimised the previously-privileged non-Russians to create a covert 'Russian Empire' legitimised by the meretricious doctrine of the 'Friendship of Peoples'.

Following an extended introductory chapter, the main text is divided into three unequal but comparable sections: Part One, accommodating Chapters 2 to 5, is entitled 'Implementing the Affirmative Action Empire' and broadly covers the period from 1923 to 1932; comprising Chapters 6 and 7, Part Two focuses

on the crossroads of the early 1930s under the title 'The Political Crisis of the Affirmative Action Empire'; and under the heading of 'Revising the Affirmative Action Empire', Chapters 8 to 11 (constituting Part Three) consider the years 1933 to 1939. Within the overall chronological structure, individual chapters are generally thematic in approach without departing from an essentially narrative treatment.

Handsomely produced by Cornell University Press, the volume provides extensive references (which appear as footnotes on each text-page to facilitate inspection by the conscientious scholar), some 46 tables conveniently integrated into the text, four maps to illustrate geopolitical shifts between 1922 to 1939, a useful - not to say essential - glossary, a comprehensive and up-to-date bibliography of primary and secondary sources, and an exhaustive index. Symbolising Martin's overall theme, the book cover incorporates a 1935 propaganda photograph of an unctuous Stalin publicising his newly-adopted 'Friendship of Peoples' slogan. Although apparently an unreconstructed version of Martin's doctoral thesis for the University of Chicago, making few discernible concessions to accessibility for a non-specialist readership, *The Affirmative Action Empire* represents a publisher's model of how to present an unapologetically academic treatise.

The professional virtues of the exposition are self-evident. While never ignoring the historiographical context of secondary sources, *The Affirmative Action Empire* is overwhelmingly a product of archive-based research. Martin's positively Herculean labours in six historical archives in Moscow and another two in Ukraine have been rewarded with a rich and abundant harvest of hitherto-inaccessible primary documentation. To complain that such a detailed investigation of so sensitive a topic by a Westerner was unthinkable in the Soviet era does not detract from Martin's remarkable achievement: the opportunities for Western penetration and exploitation of the Soviet archives offered in the post-Soviet 1990s have been seized by Martin with prodigious determination, enterprise and solid graft.

The first purpose of the study is to investigate the impact of 'korenizatsiia' over the 1920s and 1930s. What is immediately striking is the sheer sweep of geopolitical discussion, comparing the application of central strategy towards the 'national question' from the western to the eastern extremities of the Soviet Union. Martin demonstrates how the diverse societal circumstances of nations and nationalities in the more sophisticated West and the less developed East (later to be dubbed the 'Soviet Raj') meant that 'affirmative action' by All-Soviet authority bifurcated, settling for divergent objectives and disparate results across an 'empire' which encompassed extravagant ethnic variety. Recognising that the Soviet Union was far from being ethnically homogeneous, official national strategy could not be as administratively monolithic or as politically totalitarian as portrayed in Western historiography.

Martin's second preoccupation is to monitor and explain the dynamic of change in the operation of 'korenizatsiia'. The study suggests that Soviet nationalities policy was more multi-factorial than has been commonly represented, typically precipitated by a fluctuating combination of internal and external components. Simplistically expressed, Leninist strategy was designed to avoid antagonising the still-potent force of separatist nationalism by the intemperate imposition of state socialism, instead opting to handicap the instinctive 'chauvinism' of the majority Russian population and foster lasting goodwill among the non-Russians by institutionalised 'affirmative action' on their behalf. 'Korenizatsiia' was intended to 'indigenise' Soviet power through mass recruitment of local non-Russians as cadres within the Communist Party, extending and deepening Soviet authority within a state-sponsored political climate of respect for non-Russian national identity and culture.

But Martin also asserts that a hitherto-undervalued element in determining tactics towards the nationalities was geopolitical location: non-Russian nations that straddled the Soviet frontier were crucial in the elaboration of overall policy. Following the 'Piedmont Principle', conspicuous benevolence towards nations within the Soviet Union was intended to furnish supra-national window-dressing to co-nationals outside Soviet jurisdiction, simultaneously facilitating future national unification and the expansion of the Soviet Union. As nationalism was press-ganged into the service of socialism, the interests of non-Russian nationalists and the Soviet Union were - for the time being - expected to coincide. As a consequence, Ukraine (as the largest non-Russian Soviet republic) was especially generously treated in the 1920s, in the

propagandist hope of recommending Soviet-style socialism to the Ukrainian minority of Poland with a view to opportunist Soviet encroachment westward.

By the early 1930s, however, both the internal and external rationales for 'positive discrimination' had been irremediably undermined. Most non-Russians had their appetites whetted rather than slaked by 'affirmative action' while 'korenizatsiia' showed every sign of exacerbating inter-ethnic violence to the point of endangering the territorial integrity of the Soviet Union. At the same time, the Russians mightily resented the institutionalised and artificial 'reverse discrimination', which benefited non-Russians who were increasingly condemned as ungrateful, extortionate and manipulative. Meanwhile, on the western borderlands, front-line Ukraine, Belorussia, Moldavia and Karelia were now considered vulnerable to Western aggrandisement and the exploitative 'Piedmont Principle' was perceived as backfiring on the Soviet Union.

The affirmative action of the 1920s was consequently replaced by a security-conscious repression of all 'diaspora nationalities', that is to say ethnic groups within the Soviet Union which could be accused of being 'fifth columns' or 'Trojan horses' for expansionist 'kin-states' across the Soviet border. The 'Great Terror' undeniably targeted 'diaspora nationalities' (notably Poles, Finns, Belorussians and Ukrainians) in operations which would now be termed 'ethnic cleansing'. But the 'Terror' did not necessarily victimise other ethnic groups: nationalities were not harassed for their ethnic distinctiveness but because their geopolitical location exposed them to the temptation of defection from the Soviet Union. Martin asserts that available documentation indicates that anti-nationalist purges accounted for no more than one-third of executions during the 'Great Terror' (p. 338) and claims that extant evidence suggests that non-diaspora non-Russians suffered an arrest, exile and execution rate lower than the Russians (p. 424).

Two ostensibly contradictory points about the transition from the twenties to the thirties are advanced. While it is conventional to identify 1928, the year of Stalin's initial assumption of leadership, as the turning-point between the versatile Leninism of the twenties and the consolidating Stalinism of the thirties, Martin convincingly proposes the alternative of 1932 - dated specifically to the test-case of Ukrainisation - as the supreme political watershed of the interwar Soviet Union. At the same time, the traditional dichotomy between the twenties and thirties is consciously played down, with the 'unfortunate' labelling of the 1930s as the era of the 'Great Retreat' from Soviet ideals coming under close and critical scrutiny (pp. 414-16). Martin insists that the element of continuity between the two decades was authoritative and persistent, with 'silent korenizatsiia' being effectively "scaled back, although not abandoned" (p. 27), a reading which undermines the image of reactionary backlash which has dominated Western historiography of the period.

There are identifiable shortcomings to the study, some of which are patently not the responsibility of the author. As Martin candidly concedes, KGB documentation remains 'largely inaccessible' to researchers (p.387). With the expanded activities of the OGPU/NKVD so central to the 'Stalin Revolution' and 'Great Terror' over the 1930s, the current non-availability of the historically-crucial KGB archives inevitably prevents anything resembling a definitive interpretation, necessarily downgrading the present meticulous account to the level of an enterprising interim investigation.

By its very nature, administrative history is never likely to set the pulse racing and this detailed dissection of Soviet social-engineering ambition and practice cannot escape a certain hermetic and de-humanising character. In a quite literal sense, the study is essentially characterless, that is to say devoid of personalities. Although Stalin predictably looms large, always the ultimate architect of nationalities policy but often essentially arbitrating between the initiatives of underlings, no personal dimension emerges: there is plenty on the 'Stalinshchina' but precious little about Stalin himself. Significantly, the protagonists in the ongoing saga of Soviet affirmative action were typically Bolshevik second-rankers of the likes of Kaganovich, Skrypnik and Postyshev. The almost total non-appearance of first-rankers like Bukharin, Kirov, Trotsky and Zinoviev is a reminder that, while not automatically a peripheral issue, the nationalities question was still only one of a number of interlinked items high on the packed agenda of the interwar Soviet Union.

One particular professional shortcoming of the text can be laid more readily at the author's door. Perverse

though it may seem to criticise a volume of over 500 pages for being too short, the lack of chronological context in the shape of the pre-1923 and post-1939 settings is regrettable. Too little by way of historical background, either tsarist or Leninist, is provided. It is surprising, as well as disappointing, to see Richard Pipes's Cold War classic *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1924* (Harvard University Press; Cambridge, MA, 1964) and especially Jeremy Smith's post-Cold War study *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-1923* (Macmillan in association with the School of Slavonic and East European Studies; Basingstoke, 1999) cited in the bibliography but not even mentioned, still less discussed, in the body of the work. Similarly, while it would seem that the Second World War reinforced rather than retarded interwar trends, no significant attempt is made to do more than hint at their impact on the short-term (1939-41 and 1941-45), medium-term (1939-53) or long-term (1939-91) career of the Soviet Union.

Over ten years after the end of the Cold War, Western revisionist history of the defunct Soviet Union is still gathering pace, fuelled both by a greater historical objectivity and the growing availability of primary documentation. Martin has demonstrated in *The Affirmative Action Empire* an admirable open-mindedness towards the tortuous and traumatic development of the Soviet Union, and presented outstanding credentials as what Stalin once ominously described as an 'archive rat'. While Martin's reputation as a 'super-rat' is already assured, there are still more questions than answers about the career of the Soviet Union, certainly the largest and probably the most controversial country in the twentieth-century world. If and when the KGB archives are ever mined, admitting the tantalising possibility of retrospectively resolving the bewildering paradoxes of the Soviet era, it is to Martin that we must surely look for magisterial re-interpretation and re-evaluation.

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