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Reviews

# Internationalism or Russification? A Study in the Soviet Nationalities Problem

- Reviews section -

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**The Ukrainian publicist Ivan Dzyuba wrote *Internationalism or Russification? A Study in the Soviet Nationalities Problem* in 1965. Nikita Khrushchev had just been succeeded by Leonid Brezhnev. For several reasons, republishing the book today is a good idea. This 60-year-old book is surprisingly interesting and not only because in 2014 Putin launched a new attempt to Russify Ukraine through force of arms.**

The Soviet Republic of Ukraine, a part of the Soviet Union, experienced a wave of repression in the 1960s, one that specifically targeted young intellectuals. Ivan Dzyuba took an active part in the protests. He wrote this book as a letter to the leadership of the Communist Parties in Ukraine and the Soviet Union. He did not receive a reply but the book enjoyed wide underground circulation. In 1972, Dzyuba was expelled from the writers' union, arrested and sentenced to five years in prison.

## Lenin

Ivan Dzyuba shows in detail how the policy of Russification under Stalin and Khrushchev was completely at odds with the vision of Lenin and the Bolsheviks during and immediately after the Russian Revolution. The fight against Greater Russian chauvinism in the young Soviet Union was Lenin's last (and lost) fight. Fatally ill after several strokes, Lenin criticised the actions of Stalin and others in 'the Georgian question' in his 'testament' in 1923/24.

In the Soviet Union of 1965, it was of course convenient to invoke Lenin, by now an untouchable and petrified icon. Dzyuba does not make a critical assessment of the Bolsheviks and the national question during the Russian revolution. But neither does he limit himself to a few handy quotes. The book reads like a rich anthology from the early days of the Soviet Union, of polemics by Lenin, interventions by a wide spectrum of other Bolsheviks and other thinkers, Russians and Ukrainians, excerpts from manifestos and congressional resolutions... The early days of the Russian revolution and its debates on the national question come alive in this book. Marx and Engels are also covered.

While reading, one is impressed by the Marxist culture of dissident intellectuals like Dzyuba in the then Soviet Union. In that sense, this book is a good document of its time.

## Tsarism

But the book is more than that. It contains numerous interesting ideas that are still useful today.

For instance, Dzyuba analyses the specific features of Russian colonialism under the Tsars. This colonialism was different from, for example, the actions of England or France in their overseas colonies (p.131-135). Because the colonised territories were contiguous with Russian territory, a policy of complete assimilation was adopted. The subjugated peoples were not formally considered to be inferior, or of a lower race. They were not supposed to go their own way though: 'why defend a people's own identity, aren't we all brothers?' Resistance was supposedly 'betrayal of the common Fatherland'. A clever, complex and flexible strategy was developed to corrupt and de-nationalise the subjugated peoples.

The Russian Tsarist Empire, 'the Third Rome', invoked its supposed mission to liberate all Slavic peoples. Russification rested on the notion of a common homeland, brotherly ties, blood relations. Supposedly, the subject peoples were different kinds of Russians, with the Russian language as a common language to forge unity. When Tsarina Catherine II wanted to replace Ukrainian schools with Russian 'people's schools', she insisted that this should be done at the request of the parents themselves (requests that therefore had to be organised).

The continuity with the assimilation policy under Stalin and Khrushchev is striking. 'Colonialism can appear not only in the form of open discrimination, but also in the form of "brotherhood", and this is very characteristic of Russian colonialism' (p. 148). In the 1960s, no one was jailed for speaking Ukrainian, but at universities the language of instruction was Russian. Ukrainian was for use in the home. Russification wore the mask of brotherhood, the unity of the Soviet people....

Not for nothing does Putin invoke continuity with the Tsars and with the Soviet Union after Lenin: for him, there is no such thing as a Ukrainian nation. Anyone who claims there is one, is supposedly a fascist.

## City and countryside

Another strong idea in the book is the description of the negative consequences of Russification (p.280-284).

Russification maintained the division between Russian-speaking cities and the Ukrainian-speaking countryside. For the benefit of the Tsars, during the nineteenth century Ukrainian towns were industrialised in resource-rich areas. These newly industrializing regions were populated with Russian workers. The petty bourgeoisie there also adopted the language of the masters. People in such towns looked down on the countryside, where the supposedly backward population spoke Ukrainian, which was considered to be a kind of inferior dialect. During the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks, who were strong in the Ukrainian industrial cities, struggled with this division and the creation of the modern Ukrainian nation, which would eventually lead to the failure of the Ukrainian Revolution. The structure first created by this colonialism persists to this day, although Ukraine has developed into a fully-fledged nation (whatever Putin may claim).

Dzyuba describes how Russification kept rural Ukraine locked in an inferiority complex; 'the denationalizing pressure "from above", from the city, do not rank least among the factors making for that drop in vitality, that demoralization, indifference to life and drunkenness, which you can often observe among the rural population and which in themselves are a serious social problem.' (p. 281) This does not mean that things were better in the cities. The loss of roots lead to emptiness, a showy semi-culture with claim to excitement, in reality 'the horror of emptiness', reflexive irresponsibility or indifference, a hidden or visible boredom. This extended to the governance of Soviet Ukraine. Russian was not a living language, rooted in the nation, but an eraser of difference, a tool for swallowing up nations, a triumph of blunt bureaucratic uniformity, discipline and deadlines.

Even Russian intellectuals worried about the fate of Russian when it was developed into the vehicle of Russification, Dzyuba says. It is reminiscent of the sterile English that is now becoming the language of instruction in international institutions and in our universities.

It is also reminiscent of the European Union, another empire that is not a true community of peoples. Dzyuba cites on p. 296 a statement by De Gaulle, quoted in Pravda, in which De Gaulle argued against a unified Europe in which the sovereignty of peoples would disappear: not so strange when you look at the soulless bureaucracy now ruling from Brussels.

## Russification

The bulk of the book is devoted to a detailed study, supported by documents, figures and statistics, of Russification in Ukraine in the 1960s and the stories told by Moscow to cloak that policy in pseudo-internationalism and pseudo-brotherliness. The material Dzyuba gathers is impressive and gives the book its monumental power.

What went wrong in the Soviet Union? Many studies on the degeneration of the Soviet Union, the bureaucratic degeneration culminating in the Stalinist terror in the 1930s have been published. Dzyuba adds a valuable chapter with his description of Moscow's policy towards the numerous nationalities.

## Nationalism

However, there is something to be said against Dzyuba's views on nationalism and nation-building. For instance, he approvingly quotes A.D. Gradovksy who situates the formation of nations in Europe in the nineteenth century in the development of culture, freedom, involvement in political debate... (p.48). Other factors also played a role in the emergence of nation-states, such as modern forms of warfare and with this the need for taxation and conscription, a national administration and clear borders. Military confrontations explain why Germany and Austria are now separate nations.

Or look at Flanders: first there was the 'Belgian Revolution' of 1830 and then in this Belgium the cultural suppression of Flemish, resulting in a Flemish identity arising from nowhere. The parallel with the cultural oppression of Ukraine is striking, by the way, as the Russian philosopher Alexander Herzen, quoted by Dzyuba, already noticed: 'once when Herzen was in Brussels, he pointed out that the "educated" section of the Belgians spoke French, while the common people, whom the former despised, spoke Flemish. Herzen saw in this an enormous injustice and danger to democracy.' And Herzen drew the parallel with Ukraine (p. 282).

Dzyuba's account of the emergence of nations in Europe is an extrapolation of the development of Ukraine in the late nineteenth century.

In the book's opening, Dzyuba applauds the Ukrainian nation: 'The Ukrainian people has never been aggressive and intolerant towards others', 'To the overwhelming majority of Ukrainian intellectuals, because of their democratic spirit, narrow nationalism has always been alien and chauvinism quite unnatural.' (p.41). In fact, this is not true. After all, Bandera's Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) was guilty of pogroms during World War II and members of it collaborated in the Holocaust. It is just one step to connect a certain quality with the very 'nature' of a people to also connect aggressive actions by other peoples to their nature. Dzyuba does not take that step, but he is very close to it.

Dzyuba also writes that it is one's duty to be culturally active in one's own nation and not to abandon it when its national survival and future are at stake (p.91). This reads like a rejection of cosmopolitan intellectuals. Was this his intention? I was in any case left with an uneasy feeling.

But apart from that, this is a surprisingly strong book that more than deserves this reissue. The book also includes statistics, a handy list of names and an extensive register.

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