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ESSAY

*Paul A. Goble**

Federalism and Human Rights in the Soviet Union

Introduction

Mikhail Gorbachev has presided over a radical transformation of Soviet life. No areas have seen greater changes than the closely interrelated ones of federalism and human rights. Prior to Gorbachev, the Soviet Union had one kind of human rights problem; now, despite all of Gorbachev's improvements it has another. This unintended change largely resulted from Gorbachev's own reforms. This essay will consider the Soviet Union's new human rights problem, which has received little attention and yet poses serious difficulties for both Moscow and the West.

First, this essay examines how ethnicity was an essential element in the USSR's formation, contributing to its coercive character, ethnic inequality, and pattern of human rights abuses. Second, it examines how Soviet human rights abuses can be classified in relation to ethnic domination. Third, it explores how Gorbachev's revitalization campaign has changed the nature of human rights abuses in the Soviet Union by transforming ethnic and power relationships. In conclusion, this essay suggests that Gorbachev's new system poses cognitive and political difficulties for both Moscow and the West because it ignores the fundamental conflict between individual rights and the right to national self-determination.

I. The Centrality of Nationality in Soviet Political Life

Scholars have long sought the causes for Soviet human rights violations. Rarely have observers considered the nationality structure of the Soviet population.

Prior to 1917, the Russian Imperial State was not organized on ethnic lines. Individuals were not required to declare their nationality in

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any official way. Religion and language were registered, but for many groups, these two primordial ties did not correspond to ethnic ones. As a result, many subjects did not know who they were in ethnic terms; and the names their groups bore were generally imposed from outside. Demonstrating this early lack of ethnic identity, three-quarters of all ethnic groups in the USSR have names which in their own languages simply mean "human being."

Rapid social change of the late Imperial period and the even more rapid social mobilization generated by Russia's involvement in World War I caused an increasing number of ethnic groups to become self-conscious. This new national awareness led to further ethnic consolidation as well as the advancement of political demands. The demands of three Caucasian nationalities, the Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians, became the most famous only because they were the most definite. Less focused but perhaps more serious was the consolidation of Russian identity. This consolidation was marked by the formation of the Provisional Government, whose largely Russian members believed that the Imperial regime was not responding to Russian interests.

Had Russia withdrawn from World War I, this consolidation process might have led to the relatively easy secession of many groups and the emergence of a democratic system in Russia. Whether any Russian government would have tolerated Ukrainian or Belorussian secession is a difficult question—few Russians saw the Ukrainians and Belorussians as distinct nationalities. Prior to World War I, Ukrainian and Belorussian departure would have been easier because Russia was a food exporter at that time. Unfortunately, the Provisional Government was unable to withdraw from the war, and the ensuing Bolshevik *coup d'état* prevented a more healthy pattern of development.

In contrast to the Provisional Government, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were starkly anti-national, at least ideologically. This anti-national sentiment had two consequences, each of which was to have profound implications for the future of the Soviet state and human rights there. First, anti-national ideology sparked revolts and secession by many peoples on the periphery of the country, Russians and non-Russians alike. Second, Lenin and the Bolsheviks sought to spread revolution and the belief that national interests must be subordinate to class interests. Such beliefs led to the costly and dramatic reconquest of Russia's periphery and the spread of the revolution into Poland by force.

In spite of Lenin's partially successful efforts, the Soviet Union emerged more Russian because many non-Russian portions of the empire had managed to secede. At the same time, Lenin had to control his country by force, because so many of the non-Russian groups could be retained only in that way. In 1897, only forty-three percent of the Empire's population were Russians; by the end of the Russian civil war, their share had climbed above sixty percent largely because of the departure of Poland, Finland, and the Baltic states. Simultaneously,

Soviet authorities controlled the periphery, thus creating a strategic zone *des armes* for further expansion.

By creating national republics, the Soviet socialist republics of later fame, Lenin hoped to set a pattern for world revolution. At the second congress of the Comintern in 1920, Lenin argued that these republics could be prototypes for a future Polish Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), a future German SSR, and ultimately even an American SSR. Lenin did not explicitly contemplate a Union, but his vision suggests such a model.

In contrast, Stalin, who set the tone for most of the rest of Soviet history, explicitly sought a union of the republics. A Georgian by birth and a Russian by conviction, Stalin dismissed Lenin's grand plan for the spread of revolution and the gradual incorporation of the rest of the world. In a confidential letter to Lenin, published only in the third edition of Lenin's works, Stalin said that countries which had experienced self-government would be unwilling to accept voluntarily the status of a union republic, which he pointedly noted was not much different from a provincial regime.

Moreover, Stalin drew certain politically dramatic conclusions from the demographic and political changes wrought by the Russian civil war. On the one hand, Stalin used his position as Commissar for Nationality Affairs to create an ever larger number of political units based on nationality both as a sop to nationalist aspirations and as a convenient slot for his political supporters. It is seldom remarked, but Stalin never won much political support in Moscow and Leningrad until after Lenin had died. Stalin relied on the ethnicity of the provinces to win Party backing. On the other hand, Stalin played on Russian fears of more secession to justify repression. To isolate his political opponents, Stalin tapped into Russian anger toward other ethnic groups such as the Jews and Caucasians, who had played such a large roll in the revolution. Finally, Stalin relied on Russian self-confidence to generate support for his thesis of socialism in one country rather than backing Lenin and Trotsky's more traditionally Bolshevik call for world revolution.

To support this system, Stalin expanded the significance of official nationality. Every Soviet citizen had to be able to identify himself in ethnic terms. That identification would place the citizen in a particular category, depending on the political standing of his group. As the 1926 census makes clear, this identification process was no easy task. At that time, a large number of Soviet citizens still did not know their ethnic background. An even larger group identified themselves in ethnic terms that had nothing to do with ethnic identity. But, by the 1930s, when Stalin introduced the internal passport system, virtually everyone could recite his or her nationality.

Simultaneously, Stalin created a four-tiered scheme of national statehood: Union republics, autonomous republics, autonomous *oblasts*, and autonomous districts. Depending upon their size, location, and political position, Stalin put ethnic groups in different categories. All ethnic rights were given to territories rather than to their constituent

individuals and groups. Ethnic groups without territories or near the bottom of Stalin's ranking of nationalities had few privileges and had difficulty retaining their identities. Indeed, many such groups appear to have disappeared by design.

To maintain such a system required enormous force. Many ethnic groups accepted this force as the price of holding the country together against a foreign threat. Although there were other reasons for the rise of the Stalinist State, the federal system was one of the most powerful factors in determining the repressive nature of the country. Stalin's republics were artificially created nationality institutions without real powers. By insisting that everyone identify as a member of a particular nationality, Stalin had created a potentially explosive situation should any ethnic group think it could recover real power. Such an explosion could only be contained by force which, if removed, would unleash all the problems hidden by decades of oppression. Stalin counted on his cadres to understand the reality of Soviet power: the Union cannot survive without oppressive force. It is this reality that Gorbachev did not and does not understand.

II. Human Rights Abuses and the Republics

As a result of this system which continued to function largely as Stalin had intended into the 1970s, human rights violations in the USSR were closely linked to the federal system. Human rights violations were at least as prevalent in non-Russian regions as in Moscow. However, such abuses remained largely ignored because they were far more difficult to document. Essentially, there are three broad categories of abuses: those typical of the Soviet Union as a whole, those common to all non-Russian areas, and those peculiar to specific nationalities and their particular state structures.

Violations found throughout the USSR through the 1970s included political abuse of psychiatry, imprisonment of dissenters, and restrictions on religion and travel. These abuses may have been worse in the republics than in Moscow and Leningrad because the local authorities did not have to contend with Western journalists, who could be counted on to pass the information abroad. Thus, even though more human rights violations may have occurred in the republics, little information on this subject was available in the West.

Violations common to all non-Russian areas of the USSR included denial of national self-determination, inability to pursue an independent foreign policy despite the trappings of state power, restrictions on the free flow of information about the past and present, and limitations on the use of native languages and cultural facilities. Such violations were generic rather than specific and consequently were most difficult to document.

The third category of violations involved a specific national group. They reflected geographic location and the local elites. In the Ukraine,

for example, Moscow suppressed the Ukrainian Catholic Church because of Moscow's general anti-religious policy, the Church's historical links to Rome, and Uniate identification with Ukrainian national aspirations.

Violations in this third category were occasionally well-documented. One particularly good illustration of these violations is the case of Azerbaijani treatment of the Georgian national minority. The Georgians of Azerbaijan have long been subject to harassment that is generically Soviet and specifically Azerbaijani. The Azerbaijanis forced assimilation of Georgians by closing Georgian language schools and restricting Georgian access to higher education. They also refused to issue birth certificates to children with Georgian names and changed the nationality line in the passports of local Georgians regardless of their own preference. The Azerbaijanis systematically underreported the number of Georgians in the region in order to reduce the amount of community services available to them.

Other colorful and unfortunate stories could be recounted, but the point is that ethnicity stood at the center of the Soviet Union human rights problem for two reasons. First, ethnicity represented a challenge to authority that had to be countered. Second, it provided the basis for attacks by one group against another. Unless these factors are acknowledged, the human rights problem in the USSR cannot adequately be understood.

III. Gorbachev and the Transformation of the Soviet Human Rights Situation

Historically, the Soviet system was based on repression of non-Russians by Russians, who were in turn repressed by Moscow. Moscow justified this system as the price of maintaining the empire. Gorbachev's reform program unintentionally called both halves of the repression equation into question. Since Lenin, Gorbachev is the first Soviet leader who never worked in a non-Russian republic at any point in his career. He is also the only Soviet leader not to have publically addressed nationality questions before coming to power. As a result, Gorbachev launched a reform program which addressed the repression of Russians by Moscow, but failed to address the ethnic repression of non-Russians by Russians. Had the country been ethnically homogeneous, Gorbachev's reform of one half of the repression equation would have worked.

Gorbachev's sponsorship of a reduction in the power of central institutions and control mechanisms, and his encouragement of mobilization movements throughout the Soviet Union have transformed the country. On the one hand, official abuses of human rights by central authorities have notably decreased in number. On the other hand, abuses by one group against another, especially by locally dominant majorities against minorities, have increased dramatically.

Earlier, Russians had enjoyed a protected status in the republics as essentially Moscow's men on the scene. That status has changed; now Russians often are threatened with minority status themselves. At present some sixty million Soviet citizens—more than one-fifth of the total—live outside their home ethnic territories and another seven million are members of groups lacking such territories. Roughly half of the sixty million are Russians. For the first time, ethnic Russians have become a minority.

As republics have assumed greater powers and as republic leaders have become more responsive to the populations rather than to Moscow, republic nationalities—Russian and non-Russian alike—are increasingly putting pressure on these new minorities. Some of the victims of this pressure are familiar—the Jews and other Diaspora peoples. But most victims are new and are faced with the difficult task of defending themselves in a world not of their own making.

Conclusion

While the political task is difficult for those involved, it poses a challenge to outsiders as well. Increasingly in Soviet society, two sets of rights are coming into conflict: the individual rights of citizens and the collective right of nationality groups to self-determination. In the past, we in the West have been better able to defend individual rights because they are the basis of our liberal civilization. Now, in defending those rights in the current Soviet context, we may find ourselves sometimes allied with those who want to deny ethnic groups the right to choose their own destiny. It will not be easy to balance these rights, but unless we are conscious of the need to consider both and understand how Soviet federalism interacts with human rights, almost certainly we will end by betraying our most important values.