

April 17, 1970

Radio Liberty Broadcast Position Statement: The Nationality Question

Citation:

"Radio Liberty Broadcast Position Statement: The Nationality Question", April 17, 1970, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Released by the Central Intelligence Agency on October 16, 2019, in response to Mandatory Declassification Review request EOM-2018-00930. Contributed by A. Ross Johnson.

<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/290950>

Summary:

Radio Liberty discusses the issue of self-determination, and states their objective as convincing all peoples in the Soviet Union of their right to self-determination.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Blavatnik Family Foundation

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Original Scan

27 APR 1970

16

Program Policy Division
Radio Liberty

17 April 1970

BROADCAST POSITION STATEMENT

THE NATIONALITY QUESTION

Assumptions

World War I began the disintegration of the empires of the Western world and World War II, to all intents and purposes, brought them to an end, excluding only the Russian empire. The "national question" in the USSR arises directly from the fact that the Soviet government which took power in 1917 was able to extend its control over virtually all the territories which had formerly belonged to the Russian empire. While nearly all the peoples which were formerly ruled by Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the US and other powers have been able to exercise their right of national self-determination (in most cases choosing independence), the peoples of the former Russian empire continue to be ruled by the CPSU leadership as part of the USSR's "multi-national state", which even extended the areas under its control through reincorporation of the Baltic States and other Western territories during World War II. The arbitrary imposition of Soviet rule, then, is the origin of the "national question" which the Soviet government attempts to obfuscate by providing the various republics of the USSR with the formal trappings of self-rule. Appearances sometimes deceive foreign observers and even some of those ruled under this system, but the "national question" continues to exist half a century after the establishment of Soviet power because the reality is otherwise. The non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union are aware that they and their nominal leaders (who occupy key positions as the hand-picked appointees of the Moscow-based regime) cannot decide any significant political, economic, cultural, and social questions in their own areas.

The "national question" does not change in its essentials but is rendered more complex by the multiplicity of peoples and languages which exist in the USSR. The inter-relationships of these peoples, the different types of national self-awareness, awareness of other nationalities, and the frequently marked disparity of national aspiration, national achievement and manner of achievement form a group of complex variables which baffle theoreticians inside and outside the Soviet Union.

Fluctuations in party policies and ideological Weltanschauung have prevented official theoreticians in the postwar Soviet Union from formulating precise definitions of national characteristics, and ambiguities in the administration and structure of the national territories have made the resolution of such questions still more difficult. The controversy over the

42/78-02824-119/319

definition of a nation has not yet been resolved in Soviet literature, nor is there any clear understanding of lesser units, such as narodnost' (a smaller nation) and tribe. Not all nations possess Union Republics and not all narodnost's possess national territories. For the purpose of this paper it has been assumed that the nations of the Soviet Union are of different sizes, speak different languages, occupy different territories with different productive capacities, and stem from different traditions which, in their turn, might yield different aspirations in the future.

Despite these undoubted complexities, the "national question" in the USSR is the question of national self-determination. Official Soviet spokesmen hold that the "national question" does not exist because the USSR is a federal state and the Union Republics are self-governing and possess the right (which, by their own choice, they do not exercise) to secede from the USSR. However, as already suggested above, the non-Russian peoples of the USSR know very well the extent to which they are self-governing and do not deceive themselves about the possibility of any Union Republic actually exercising its right to secede as long as a strong centralized government remains in Moscow.

The right of national self-determination is, however, by no means restricted to the question of secession, its most visible and dramatic form of expression. The broader aspects of self-determination are intimately linked with the exercise of democratic rights which permit individuals and groups to govern themselves, to determine their own destinies and to enjoy maximum opportunities for self-development and self-expression. In these respects all peoples of the Soviet Union, including Russians, suffer denial of their rights by the arbitrary, centralized regime with power concentrated in the hands of a few leaders. While any opportunity to exercise the right of secession appears extremely remote at the present time, there are recognizable indications that members of various nationalities are pressing for extension of national rights in more immediate areas. In the foreseeable future, any progress toward the realization of national rights would probably take place in the context of a limited extension of national control over political, economic, cultural or social questions in their own areas, or of gradual moves toward decentralization and recognition of democratic rights in the USSR as a whole.

Up to the present day the "national question", for the reasons stated above, has no official status in the Soviet Union. Since the question has been driven underground, the only surface manifestations of the struggle for national self-determination which attract the notice of the Soviet press and official spokesmen involve so-called "national deviations" and localism (mestnichestvo), against which periodic campaigns are waged and for which national leaders are dismissed from time to time. Other manifestations of a similar nature are to be found in esoteric discussions among the national intelligentsias and in Soviet academic literature. Such discussions often revolve around theoretical concepts like that of the "single stream" (yediniiy potok), convergence, internationalism and rapprochement (sblizheniye) and are usually expressed in Aesopian language comprehensible only to the initiated.

The Soviet leadership is of course well aware of the "national question" and obviously hopes that it can be eliminated once and for all by creating a Russian-speaking Soviet man whose only traditions are Soviet and whose religion is Communism, whose patriotism is exclusively directed to the Soviet state, and whose homeland is a single expanse of Soviet territory. Consequently the leadership promotes the use of the Russian language at the expense of all other languages and seeks to russify the other peoples in every possible way in order to destroy their own national culture and traditions on the way to creation of one Soviet nation.

Although this seems to offer a privileged position to the Russian people, it would be a mistake to conclude that all or even most Russians are, therefore, prepared to accept the suppression of other national groups within the USSR. Thoughtful Russians, in particular, are aware that their own language and culture are simply being used as ideological instruments by the CPSU, and they sense that their own freedom from Party control is intimately linked to that of other national groups. Many Russian intellectuals reject the Soviet solution of the "national question" and a few have already aligned themselves openly on the side of the national minorities, particularly those like the Crimean Tatars who have been exiled from their homeland.

It is possible, even probable, that unremitting grassroots pressure under the leadership of a national intelligentsia and with the support of the Russian intelligentsia must ultimately force open discussion of national and nationality questions among the CPSU hierarchy. At the same time, it should not be assumed that these stresses and strains cannot be resolved equitably within a Marxist or post-Marxist structure if this is desired by the people, provided Russian Chauvinism in the party and state apparatus is curtailed and abandoned. small

Objectives

1. RL's basic objective is to propagate the conviction that all peoples of the Soviet Union should enjoy the right to be self-governing. Ultimately they should have an opportunity to exercise their democratic right of unhampered, free self-determination through some form of democratic electoral procedure.
2. RL's immediate objective is to convince listeners that in order to achieve full self-determination it is first necessary to work toward limited goals which can be achieved more immediately. RL seeks to persuade listeners to work for more immediate goals by suggesting areas in which inequalities could be righted, national control extended and national and individual rights respected, discussing various possible solutions to these problems.
3. Radio Liberty seeks to develop in all national groupings of the USSR a recognition of the common cause which all share in seeking individual rights, liberties and self-government in opposition to the authoritarian regime. We strive to promote mutual cooperation among all nationalities each in its own best interests and for the greater good of all against the centralized regime.

Implementation

While bringing out the ultimate need for full self-determination, Radio Liberty does not take any position as to what the future political or social order of any nationality within the present boundaries of the USSR should be, and makes it clear to the audience that the relationships of the peoples of the USSR should be determined by their ~~own~~ free choice.

However, the main emphasis of programming output is on making listeners aware of their more immediate choices, stimulating them to explore means of improving their present situation by extending their exercise of national and individual rights. Specifically, RL concentrates on bringing to the attention of listeners opportunities for progress in immediate situations and providing information which might be useful to them in seeking solutions:

a. Party and state structure:

- (1) RL stresses that national equality within the CPSU will only be attained when due recognition is given to the national rights of its component parts in national administrative subdivisions and to the fact that national party leaders should be responsible first to their own constituents. Programming should lead the listener to consider specific aspects of this problem and means for correcting them.
- (2) RL points up the need to clarify ambiguities existing in administrative-budgetary questions between the center, the Union Republics and Autonomous Republics.
- (3) RL questions the subordination of many branches of administration to All-Union ministries rather than Union Republican ministries (e.g. education) and emphasizes the benefits to be gained from a reversal of this trend.

b. Economic structure:

- (4) RL's primary concern in economic aspects of the "national question" is to emphasize each nationality's right to self-government, to control its own economic affairs. We avoid becoming embroiled in the complex, and secondary, argument as to whether central control by the CPSU constitutes economic exploitation, or whether Soviet claims that it has forwarded national economic development are genuine or spurious.
- (5) Similarly, in regard to population movement and the importation of cadres, RL emphasizes the need to give each nationality the opportunity to strengthen and develop its own cadres, in the best economic interests of both the USSR and the region concerned. RL discusses the importation of cadres in specific terms related to both the economic and political needs of the area, and points up instances where such actions can or do bring about defects in and alienation of national cadres, emphasizing the need for each nationality to determine for itself when acute labor shortages or the need for skilled personnel requires the importation of cadres.

c. Culture:

- (6) RL shows that, while political and economic considerations are more complicated, cultural autonomy is a realizable and realistic aspiration of the Soviet nations and nationalities in present circumstances, assuming only the Soviet government's readiness to promote good will among all peoples of the USSR and to abandon ossified, clearly unrealistic, ideological positions.
- (7) RL also emphasizes that the study of the cultural heritage of each people should not be impeded by arbitrary restrictions stemming from rigidly orthodox interpretations of ideology, and that cultural relations with other countries, including those outside the "socialist bloc", should be permitted to expand. These will enable a healthy internationalism to develop and help all the peoples of the USSR to achieve a cultural identity in the eyes of the outside world.
- (8) Since language is the most important medium by which national cultures develop, RL supports the aspirations of the various Soviet peoples for free and natural development of their native languages, recognizing at the same time that in present conditions the Russian language does provide a lingua franca for some purposes.

d. Education:

- (9) RL stimulates concern for a development of education which permits full development of national cultures within the scope of their potentialities. Changes leading to the establishment of more direct control over education by national administrations, rather than by central authorities in Moscow, would be desirable since it would facilitate indigenous development of both national languages and cultural traditions.

Treatment

Radio Liberty's treatment of the subject is serious, calm and dignified. We avoid highly emotional and colored presentations, as well as sarcasm and invective, and are not frivolous or petty. RL endeavors to present facts and information without the same kind of distortion of statistics and other data indulged in by Soviet media, and to stimulate thought on the part of listeners by analysis which ends with questions rather than ready-made conclusions.

The most important audience consists of party and governmental functionaries at all levels and in all regions of the Soviet Union. Secondly, the national intelligentsias (scientific and technical, as well as cultural) form an extremely receptive target. The rural population would have a lower priority due to its relative impotence in comparison with the other two groups.

Promoting the sense of common cause and mutual cooperation among nationalities, RL strives to nurture and develop healthy nationalist feelings which recognize the democratic rights of all, and to stress the humanistic potentialities of nationalism while discouraging its chauvinistic, paranoid or arrogant forms. Radio Liberty recognizes that all the peoples of the present USSR will have to develop forms of cooperation with one another long after they have succeeded in modifying the Soviet system, and it is essential now and in the future for the welfare of all these peoples that their mutual relations be founded on a basis of equality, mutual respect and tolerance, and mutual recognition of the rights of all to individual liberties and national self-determination. Therefore, Radio Liberty avoids stimulating enmity among any nationality towards any other.

In implementing this effort to promote mutual cooperation it is essential that programming should be consistent in all languages, and that all services make heavy use of cross-reporting developments affecting the exercise of national rights by other nationalities. It should be noted that some, perhaps many, non-Russians listen to RL's Russian Service. A major objective for these broadcasts is to inform the russified audience of the significance of its own national role and to help it to retain, or develop, national self-awareness and national pride, while the Russian audience should be reminded of the importance of other cultures and their rights to exist on a basis of equality with its own.