

The Emergence of Nationalism under Gorbachev

Changes in the political structure of the former Soviet Union led to its demise.

by Allegra Wechsler

Why did nationalism emerge in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev? At first glance the answer seems deceptively simple: nationalism emerged because of policies like Glasnost and perestroika. The republics had always had a nationalist sentiment, but the Soviets had repressed this feeling, and once restrictions on free speech abated, nationalism simply burst forth. This hypothesis, sometimes called the "sleeping beauty" theory, is not satisfactory, however, because it does not explain why some areas were more nationalistic than others. Most importantly, though, the theory paints too simple a picture of the event and does not address other factors that played a key role.

To start at the very beginning, nationalism must be defined along with its basic characteristics. The Collins English Dictionary says that it is "a sentiment based on common cultural characteristics that bind a population and often produces a policy of national independence or separatism." Gellner adds that, in such a case, ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones. (Gellner 2)

What are these vaguely mentioned characteristics to which the Collins dictionary refers? People desire their own land where they can speak their own language, practise their own religion, control their own economy, protect their own environment, make their own rules, and surround themselves with their own culture.

All ethnic groups, however, do not have these nationalistic desires. If some ethnic communities can live together peacefully and happily, why does nationalism occur? This is not a simple question, but it is central to understanding why nationalism developed under Gorbachev. There are a number of reasons why nationalism emerges, and many, but not all of these different preconditions must be present in order to

ignite the feelings of a group. First of all, a people need a religion; a common language, spoken and written; an area they claim as their homeland that preferably has historical and cultural significance; an ethnic elite who can lead the people, and an intelligentsia who can organize the movement. (Smith 48) These conditions, though, are not enough, since many groups have them but are not nationalistic. In addition, a people need to become conscious of themselves as a group. (Smith 50) This sometimes occurs when an ethnic are repressed or when there is a power vacuum or some other type of uncertainty that brings the people's physical and economic security into question.

If all ethnicities are not nationalistic, is nationalism then natural? Gellner and Snyder, two authorities in this field, believe that the movement is natural because of the pressures of the modern era. In today's world, only nation-states function on the world stage. (Snyder 11) Moreover, industrialization creates a need for a nation-state because a modern economy demands a high culture and an educated workforce where all people speak the same language. (Gellner 40) Only nationalism can provide these prerequisites to affluence which all people and states desire.

If nationalism is natural for developed or developing countries, then it ought to have occurred in the republics. It is therefore important to mention that this sentiment did exist before the Soviet takeover, especially in the Ukraine, Armenia, and Georgia, and it provided important roots for its later emergence under Gorbachev and his predecessors.

If nationalism did exist in a number of places, why did it not emerge before Gorbachev came to power? The "sleeping beauty" theory claims that it would have developed earlier and that only forced repression restrained it. This, however, is not true. As explained above, nationalism needs a number of preconditions, and many of them did not exist in the republics from 1925 to 1988. The main reason nationalism did not occur during the Soviet era is due to the fact that Stalin did his utmost to destroy

it and worked to replace it with an all-encompassing, uniting, Soviet nationalism.

Stalin understood that nationalism needed a religion, a language, elites, customs, and an identity with a homeland in order to emerge or continue, and through his policies in the 1930's he systematically eliminated each precondition. He banned religion and closed churches and mosques; he destroyed languages by imposing the language of one group over that of another; he separated people from their homeland by deportation, collectivization, or execution. (Hosking 238-55)

As Stalin destroyed, however, he also *built*, and his new institutions and programs further undermined individual group identity by creating Soviet nationalism. The Marxist-Leninist doctrine claimed that separate group nationalism was the enemy, since it was bourgeois and linked to capitalism. (Bescancon 16) National differences were now subordinate to class differences, and the Soviet system created a "new socialist person" who was not motivated by patriotic attachments to a nation-state, but to the membership in an "international community of soviet peo-

The main reason nationalism did not occur during the Soviet era is due to the fact that Stalin did his utmost to destroy it and worked to replace it with an all-encompassing, uniting, Soviet nationalism.

pie." (Gleason 83)

If it is true, however, that nationalism could not have materialized during the Stalin era, how did it emerge under Gorbachev? The paradoxical answer lies in Stalin's and his successor's policies. As they destroyed nationalism

with one hand, they accidentally built it with the other. Their programs created native elites, an intelligentsia, and a literate people united by one language who associated themselves with a particular territory. Therefore, since these characteristics are the earlier mentioned prerequisites for nationalism, it is not surprising that nationalist sentiment could put down its roots. It is important to note briefly that in general Stalin's predecessors

Under Gorbachev's predecessors, the republics desired their own culture, but that did not mean that they wanted to sever their ties with the Soviet Union itself; this desire only developed under Gorbachev.

sors' policies furthered cultural ethnicity and strengthened the republics' foundation which later enabled them to seek their independence in the late 1980's.

The evidence from the preceding paragraphs shows that nationalism had taken root during the Stalin era and then continued to grow under his successors. Yet, an important difference must be made between ethnic consciousness and ethnic nationalism. It is one thing for a group to want its own language and culture, and quite another for it to want independence in the form of a nation-state. Under Gorbachev's predecessors, the republics desired their own culture, but that did not mean they wanted to sever their ties with the Soviet Union itself; this desire only emerged under Gorbachev. Certain events and policies occurred during 1955-1990 that catalysed this ethnic consciousness and turned it into nationalism.

Gorbachev's policies under perestroika helped create nationalism in a number of ways. Glasnost, the policy which allowed for a greater degree of free speech and sought to uncover the truth about the past, revolutionized the country and helped lead the republics towards independence. First, by calling attention to past and present problems, Gorbachev showed that the Party was not perfect and that the history of the Soviet Union was not entirely glo-

rious. (Goble 3) Many people had no idea that such horrible atrocities had occurred, and Gorbachev's disclosure angered the population and accentuated national conflicts and differences. Due to glasnost, people were able to debate, to express national sentiment, and to air their grievances; they could even hold demonstrations without the former fear of punishment. (White 143) Along with glasnost, Gorbachev's refusal to use force as a method of control allowed people a mental and physical freedom that they had never known.

Secondly, Gorbachev's policy of the devolution of power from the center to the republics also fostered nationalism. Formerly, leaders of the republics took their orders and received their legitimacy from Moscow since the center had the power to appoint and dismiss officials. Gorbachev, however, changed the balance of power when he decided that people ought to be involved in politics. Once people were given the right to vote, leaders of the republics suddenly found themselves responsible to their constituents, not to Moscow. In order to gain legitimacy the party secretaries found themselves championing their own regional interests instead of those of the Soviet Union. Lastly, the new economic policy of *khozrashchet*, or self-financing, which stated that each republic should pay its own way, created a feeling of independence, separateness, and autonomy.

Gorbachev's new policies alone, however, probably would not have transformed ethnic consciousness into nationalism. However, the ideological break up of the Communist Party along with the further economic decline cemented the fate of the Union and pushed the Republics towards freedom.

All people need to believe in something whether it is a god, a goal, or a mission. Early empires were bound together by Christianity, and people of different groups submitted to their ruler because he had been appointed by God. Although the USSR claimed to be an atheist country, in a sense it had its own religion. It replaced God with an ideal - Communism. All people should submit not to a king or to a god, but to this bright and shining vision. Moreover, Communism created its own "gods" by forming cults around their leaders - especially Lenin. Marxist-Leninist ideology and the Communist Party were the glue that held the supranational union together. (Sakawa259) Once the Party fell and

its ideology was discredited, the disillusioned republics searched for an alternative and found their replacements within themselves.

The economic and political situation in the country also propelled the republics towards nationalism. As "perestroika staggered from crisis to crisis" and as the economic situation worsened, some republics began to think that they would be better off on their own. (Sakwa 265) Moreover, as people learned more about the environment and uncovered the wasteful and destructive policies of the USSR, they wanted to protect their land from further harm. This, of course, meant that republics wanted more autonomy. The republics had been moving in that direction ever since the earlier mentioned policies of *khozrashchet* and popular voting, and these additional inadequacies of the state only strengthened their rebellious feelings.

Lastly, one other factor that created nationalism at this time was the "domino effect." (Bowker) As countries in Eastern Europe gained real independence from Moscow in 1989, the Baltic republics began to agitate for freedom. As the Baltics sought independence, the Ukraine and Byelorussia and the republics in the Caucasus became interested as well. (Brzezinski 4) Finally, as these republics moved towards autonomy, the remaining republics joined them. Thus, when the Baltic Republics, who had always been nationalistic because they had not been incorporated into the

Due to Glasnost, people were able to debate, to express national sentiment, and to air their grievances; they could even hold demonstrations without the former fear of punishment.

Soviet Union until World War II and had formerly been independent, autonomous states, grabbed at the chance for independence which Gorbachev's policies offered, they created a precedent which other republics decided to follow.

In conclusion, nationalism emerged under Gorbachev for four reasons. The preconditions needed to spark the movement were in place. Secondly, Marxist-Leninist ideology, the glue hold-

of these problems, the economic situation worsened and many republics began to think that they would do better fending for themselves. Lastly, once one republic obtained self-rule, other republics began to consider the idea, and nationalism simply spread. Nationalism was not as

The ideological break up of the Communist Party along with further economic decline cemented the fate of the Union and pushed the Republics towards freedom.

strong in all republics, nor was autonomy always desired at first, but as other republics left the Union, pressure mounted on those who remained. In the end, it is also important to remember that the Soviet Union was not doomed to break apart when Gorbachev came to office. The end of the Empire was the result of a combination of its history and Gorbachev's policies. Nationalism could not have emerged without both of these factors.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Besancon, Alain. "The Nationalities Issue in the USSR." *Survey*, vol. 30 no. 7, June 1989.
- Brzezinski, Zbigniew. "Post-Communist Nationalism." *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 68 no. 5, Winter 1989/1990.
- Gellner, Ernest. "Post-Communist Nationalism." *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 68 no. 5, Winter 1989/1990.
- Gleason, Gregory. "Nationalism and Its Discontents." *The Russian Review*, vol. 52 no. 4, January 1993.
- Goble, Paul. "Ethnic Policies in the USSR." *Problems of Communism*, vol. 38, July-August 1989.
- Hosking, Geoffrey. *A History of the Soviet Union*. London, 1990.
- Sakawa, Richard. *Gorbachev and His Reforms 1985-1990*. New York, 1990.
- Smith, Anthony. "The Ethnic Sources of Nationalism." *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 35 no. 1, Spring 1993.
- Snyder, Jack. "Nationalism and the Crisis of the Post-Soviet State." *Survival*, vol. 35 no. 1, Spring 1993.
- White, Stephen, Alex Pravda, and Zvi Gitelman, eds. *Developments in Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics*. London, 1992.

Fairness

continued from page 26

"Why should anyone be upset about being fair?" CNN's Larry King said. "It forced us to deal with community issues and began out of a great need when for a long time black issues weren't brought up in Montgomery, Alabama; Catholic parishes in New Orleans never [heard] a show in which someone [favored] birth control" (*Los*

CNN's Larry King - "Why should anyone be upset about being fair?"

Angeles Times). The doctrine will promote accuracy and diversity in reporting, not restrict the parameters of robust public debate.

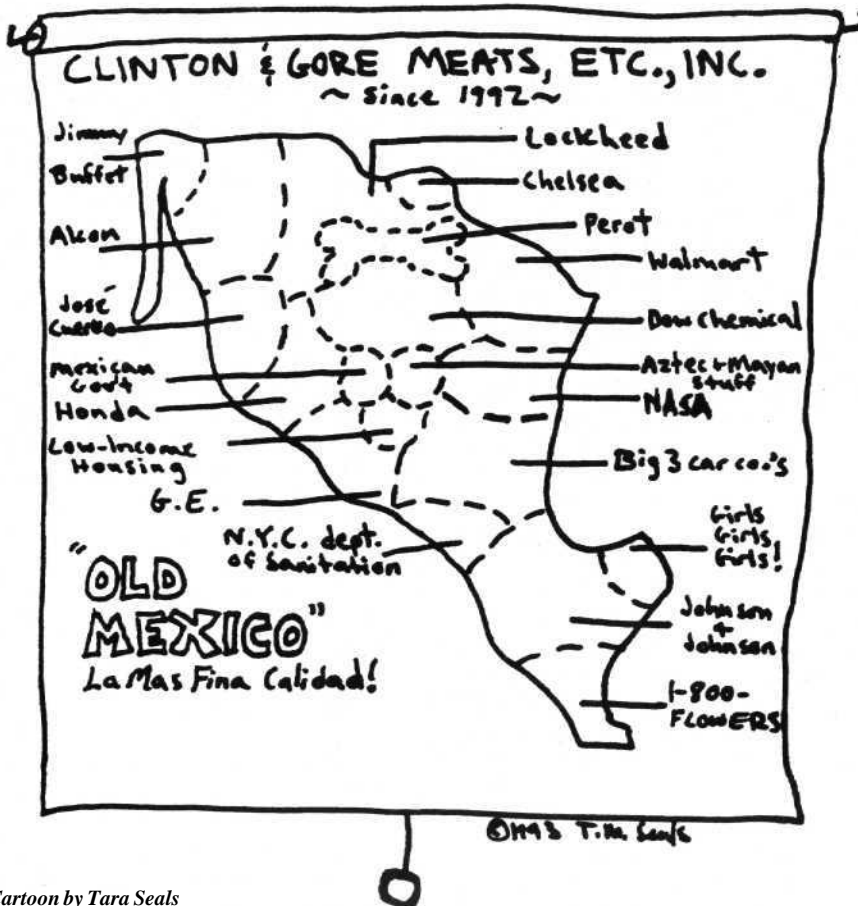
A STEP TOWARDS CHANGE

The campaign financing bill passed by the House on November 22, 1993 included one of the doctrine's provisions of guaranteeing equal campaign time by providing candidates vouchers to buy advertising time. This marked a significant step towards the reenactment of the doctrine. Still, the reenactment of the Fairness Doctrine is a delicate issue that must be approached with caution. The public needs to discard its fear of an omnipotent "Big Brother" government and realize that their right to information is being nibbled away by the very symbol of free speech. Hopefully, the bipartisan effort will break fetters on the long-awaited compromise that free speech goes hand in hand with government regulation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abramson, Jefferey B. *The Electronic Commonwealth*. New York: Basic Books, 1988.
- Bngdikian, Ben H. *The Media Monopoly*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- Demac, Donna A. *Liberty Denied*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990.
- Hertsgaard, Mark. *On Bended Knee*. New York: Garrar Straus Giroux, 1988.
- "Religious Broadcasters Debate Fairness Doctrine." *The Arizona Republic* 2 Oct. 1993
- "Developments in Communications Law." *Legal Times* 17 May 1993.
- "Effort to Revive Broadcasting's Fairness Doctrine Raises Static." *Los Angeles Times* 17 Nov. 1993.

Cartoon Corner



Cartoon by Tara Seals