

The Fifteen Republics Of The USSR



1 Armenia	9 Lithuania
2 Azerbaijan	10 Moldavia
3 Belorussia	11 Russian Federation
4 Estonia	12 Tajikstan
5 Georgia	13 Turkmenia
6 Kazakhstan	14 Ukraine
7 Kirghizia	15 Uzbekistan
8 Latvia	

National Identity Crisis

'Nationalities policy', Mikhail Gorbachev told the central committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) on February 18, 1988, 'is the most fundamental, vital issue of our society'. Less than a week later, the people of Armenia provided evidence in support of his statement by demonstrating in their hundreds of thousands for the transfer of the predominantly Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region from Azerbaijan to Armenia.

Since the Alma Ata demonstrations of December 1986, the Soviet Union has seen a series of actions by representatives of different nationality groups, expressing grievances relating to what can be broadly termed the nationality question. Kazakhs protested about the appointment of a Russian as first secretary of the Communist Party of their republic. Groups of Jews demand the right to emigrate. Cri-

mean Tatars demand the right to return to their homeland. Ukrainians demand that their language be given the status of the official language of the Ukraine. Belorussians bemoan the lack of Belorussian-language education. Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians demand an end to Russification and the publication of the 'secret protocol' of the Nazi-Soviet pact under which the then independent Baltic states were to be absorbed in the Soviet Union.

These developments are inextricably linked with the development of *glasnost* and the changes in political life introduced by Gorbachev. It is striking that the Crimean Tatars and the Armenians both carried portraits of Gorbachev on their marches. At the February plenum, Gorbachev spoke also of 'fundamentally changing the role of the Soviets'. And it was the Nagorno-Karabakh soviet which sparked off the Armenian demonstrations by petitioning for the transfer of the region.

Glasnost has not created the nationality problems in the Soviet Union, but rather thrown light on them. The

creation of the USSR was itself a response by Lenin to the danger of Russian chauvinism in the post-revolutionary Soviet Russian state. Lenin favoured the unity of the vanguard of the workers of Russia, regardless of nationality, in a single organisation. Furthermore, he looked forward to the fusion or merging (*sliianie*) of all nationalities in the long run. But the immediate task for Lenin after the revolution was to undercut the nationalism of the minorities by giving them their own republics within the federal framework. Within these republics their languages could flourish, and a proletariat and political leadership could be reared from among the native population.

These aims were put into practice with impressive results until the mid-1930s when the Stalinist terror and the atmosphere of Russian chauvinism put the lid on the aspirations of the minorities. After the 20th congress of the CPSU in 1956, however, the elites of the national minorities were able to begin to consolidate their position in their own republics. Although the party lead-



Armenia: National movement

erships in the republics are subordinate to Moscow, they have considerable room for manoeuvre and, as Gorbachev has found, it is not always easy for the centre to assert its authority or to change the local leaders.

A major area of concern for Gorbachev is the implementation of *perestroika* in the parts of the Soviet Union inhabited by the burgeoning Muslim population, central Asia and Azerbaijan. While the dangers of Soviet Muslims being infected by the Shi'ite fundamentalism from the Iranian revolution may have passed, Moscow's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan could well strengthen nationalist aspirations. The decision to tackle the corruption, nepotism and intimidation prevalent in the local political elites by sending in Russians from outside is insulting to national feelings.

The lack of non-Russians at the all-Union decision-making level is also being felt. Whereas under Andropov there were three representatives of the Muslim nations in the politburo, now there are none. Discontent could develop very quickly if

the Muslims come to believe that their vital interests are being neglected, as for example over the cancellation of the project to divert water from Siberian rivers to central Asia.

The main nationality-related issue, raised in the newspapers and journals of the republics, in petitions and in street demonstrations, is the defence of the native languages. Here Gorbachev has an opportunity to win popularity among the non-Russians by curbing the artificial promotion of the Russian language and announcing that the *sliianie* of nationalities will only be achieved in the very long term. He could avoid any Russian nationalist backlash of the *Pamyat* variety by loosening the controls on the Russian Orthodox Church. In view of the link between national feeling and religion in the Soviet Union, an increase in the level of religious freedom would mitigate national grievances. It would be asking too much, however, to expect a plebiscite in Lithuania on whether it should remain in the USSR.*

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