

# The United Soviet People: a Myth or Reality?

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**Abstract.** *The paper deals with the phenomenon of the Soviet community, which was one of the main components of nation building issues in the USSR. Nowadays, there is an increasing interest in the nature of the ‘united soviet people’ phenomenon. Whether it was a mere ideological stamp and what connection, if any, it may still have with a contemporary reality - are the questions yet to be answered. The authors of the article set the task to examine under what conditions the concept emerged, evolved and to envisage its possible transformation in the future. The purpose of the paper is to give assessment to the concept of the Soviet people, its emergence, transformation and return to a political agenda of Russian politics and its research.*

**Keywords** – community, Soviet people, nationalism, Russification, national policy, ideology<sup>1</sup>.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Proclamation of the USSR as a new state in 1922 took place alongside radical change of social policy. The Bolshevik party faced a challenge after establishing its regime since the Russian Empire appeared to be “the Prison of peoples” so far. In the view of that a new community was to be established to correspond to principally new approach included into the programme of constructing socialism and later communism in the new state.

This topic was popular in Soviet and Russian studies in the 1970s and 1980s. The term “Russification” can be found in the monograph by D. Warns *Russia: a Modern History*; it was often repeated in the collection of research papers *Ethnic Russia in the USSR: The Dilemma of a Dominance* and other works. The policy of Russification, according to American scientists, led to a situation when “the rights of the Russian people suppressed the rights of other nationalities” [4; 6; 9]. For many works, the use of the term “Russification” with the definitive “aggressive” is characteristic. Joint use of both these notions is present in the works of J. Dunlop [2; 3] and other Western experts.

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## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Various aspects of national identity establishment, issues of *the Soviet people* formation and theory of Russian nationalism in the Soviet state are subject to study by Western social scientists. Many American authors analyze different aspects of Russian nationalism in their Russian studies: *The Faces of Contemporary Russian Nationalism* by J. Dunlop [2], *The Long Road to Freedom: Russia and Glasnost* by W. Laqueur [5] to name just few. Western researchers believe that party leaders intended to redraw national feelings of the population, to create “a new historical community - the Soviet people” in the shortest period of time. R. Pipes claims that practical steps to create a “united community - the Soviet people” were among the reasons for the emergence of nationalism [7]. Russian nationalism as a separate topic of research in Western social science has always coexisted with the study of the policy of the Soviet state in the field of national construction and with the efforts of the Soviet authorities to form a new kind of person - *Soviet citizen*, as well as a uniform community - *the Soviet people*.

In the post-Soviet period the interest in studying various aspects of the national policy of the USSR waned in Russian studies in the West, but grew in Russia. All contradictions and unexplained issues related to the solution to the national question in the USSR in the period after 1991 gave rise to disputes about the existence of a special phenomenon - *the Soviet people*. A thesis about the existence of the so called *Eurasian* people appeared in the discussion led by Russian social science experts. Professor M. Shishin, Ph.D., the head of the Altai Regional Public Foundation *Altai - XXI Century* is among those holding that point of view [10]. The Chairman of the Altai regional organization of the trade union of public education L. Ivanovsky challenged M. Shishin on that point holding that the Soviet people existed as a people under the authority of the Soviet system, the Bolshevik system, the Stalinist regime. There is also an opinion, that in modern realities the phenomenon of the Soviet citizen is negatively perceived, being an analogue of pessimism, passivity, and immaturity. The head of the School of Cultural Studies, High School of Economics V. Kurennoy, is convinced that just as there was no purposeful policy of

Sovietization in the national sphere, there were no united Soviet people and the rights of nations in the USSR were carefully observed, according to the Leninist concept of the right of nations to self-determination. A publicist and editor-in-chief of *the Russian Observer* online magazine Yegor Kholmogorov also denies the existence of *the Soviet people* as a special phenomenon. He is confident that according to the Soviet system organization patterns there was not and could not be “any Soviet people in the ethnic and cultural sense - in the sense of existence of large historical nations” [11]. A leading researcher at the Institute of Sociology in Russian Academy of Sciences L. Byzov states that the Soviet people as a community was a political reality. Perhaps the development of this concept was not finalized, as those ideologues who were quick to talk about a new historical community were a little ahead of time, but a certain trend and common features of a single nation did exist [12]. However, this community disintegrated, failing to pass the test of time, being dissolved after facing the political crisis and the collapse of the Soviet state. Most of the discussion participants agree that regardless of whether *the Soviet people* phenomenon within the Soviet state existed or not, there was a conflict of national interests, which inevitably led to a crisis and disintegration of the USSR, as well as the emergence of new, national states. Given this sad experience, one should forget about the need to form a new uniform national idea and a new *Russian* community because this is a step back in time.

In the post-Soviet period it became clear that the notorious “united community-Soviet people” is an ideological product without adequate representation. In the view of this fact, political leaders of our day answer to the question on what remains of the “united Soviet people” and whether this community existed at all. In one of his speeches Vladimir Putin noted: “The USSR managed to create a certain substance, which was placed above interethnic and interfaith relations. Unfortunately, it was of ideological nature, it was a socialist idea ...” Putin expresses confidence that “We will strengthen ... the state-civilization, which is able to organically solve the problem of integrating various ethnic groups and faiths” [9]. At the same time, D. Medvedev emphasizes that “the experience of the USSR is currently not applicable” [8]. The search for a national idea suitable for huge masses of people generally called *Russians* continues.

Russian people living in Russia and constituting about 85% of its population did not avoid the influence of ideological rollback. There was a denial of both the very existence of the concept *the Soviet people* in real life and its essence. *The Soviet people* as a concept began to be perceived as an analogue of humility and servility. This opinion, for example, is held by ethnologist S.V. Cheshko [1].

### III. METHOD

The research devoted to issues of constructing the Soviet people faces the following challenges: politicization of the topic and historical research, methodological limitations and strict frames set by authorities towards the problems.

Problematic and chronological approaches obtain a defining status in the research methodology, and the problematic approach appears to be a leading one. It turned out to be the most optimal due to given possibility to cover the multidimensionality of concrete-historical situation of formation of a certain nation in a relatively full understanding in time and space. During the study the authors referred to following documents: speeches of Communist party leaders from 1920s – 1930s, programme documents of the CPSU. The authors also referred to the materials from electronic resources, and implemented the quantitative analysis methods.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The proclamation of the formation of a new state in 1922 — the USSR — was accompanied by a fundamental change in its social policy. The process of national construction was not easy; it began with disputes over the very principle of building a multinational state. The people of the new state, according to the ideologues of the party, were united by the principle characteristic of the Franco-American tradition – the same culture, language, and territory, common economic and political history. Yet, it had to be adopted on a new political and ideological basis.

Despite the fact that national policy issues sharpened in the late Brezhnev period (end of 1970s – early 1980s), the “united Soviet people” remained a concept identifying certain community. The following criteria turned out to be proofs of it: living on a common territory, obtaining a citizenship of the same state, having common language of interethnic communication and interacting within a single economic system. These patterns were applicable to a majority of the country’s population. Around the same period, Soviet social science started to circulate the term *the multinational Soviet people*, which was fundamentally different from the term *the united Soviet people* of the 1930s.

First, we need to say that questions on a single supranational community, the Soviet people, are on the top of the agenda due to the issues of forming a new concept of *Russians* as a nation. It is also important for the presenting of a new political ideology that unites peoples within one state and a single cultural memory. The most appropriate entity of a single cultural memory appeared to be a common Soviet past, a united Soviet people.

The concept of *the Soviet people* was based on a number of unity factors – territorial, geographic, cultural, historical, linguistic (in reality, at least two thirds of the population of each *Soviet socialist nation* called Russian their native language), state, political and economic. Therefore, it had the signs of the formation of a new nation (like the American nation). We should note that the process of nation emergence did not come to an end: a few decades is too short time to form a nation as a single community.

The term *the Soviet people* appeared in the 1920s, but began to be widely used to refer to the population of the USSR in the 1930s. Until the early 1960s, the concept was not used as an ideological cliché. It was developed with

the participation of L. Trotsky in the 1920s, N. Bukharin in the 1930s and J. Stalin in the 1930–50s. Later on, in the 1960s, the process was led by N. Khrushchev and in 1970s- by L. Brezhnev.

Soviet ideologues sought to create a new culture, but somehow they took the Russian culture as a basis: it was the Russian language, which became an official language in the USSR, and so the language of international communication. And it was the Russian culture that became the core of Soviet culture. But in the late 1920s all national alphabets were redesigned with the use of Latin letters. Only in the second half of the 1930s, when it became clear that the world revolution idea had failed, and the prospect of the coming World War II required the use of nationalist sentiments to raise patriotism, the glorification of the Russian language and the transfer of all writing to the Cyrillic alphabet began. This image of a Soviet citizen was well perceived exclusively in the Slavic lands (Russia, Belarus, and Eastern Ukraine), where everyone was fluent in Russian, and all their inhabitants were united by a common history, common life, and common cultural norms. However, the more the region differed in its linguistic composition, religion, traditions, way of life, the more difficult it was for its people to accept this image of the Soviet citizen as belonging to someone of their own kind.

Establishing a new community - *the Soviet people* was one of the basic points stated in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union program documents. You can find this guideline in the CPSU Program of 1961. The materials of 24<sup>th</sup> CPSU Congress (1971) and the 25<sup>th</sup> CPSU Congress (1976), and the USSR Constitution of 1977 included thesis stating that the USSR is a state based on the existence of the "new historical community of people - multinational Soviet people" [10]. It is characteristic that the creation of this new community, referred to in the Constitution of 1977, was considered a natural result of Lenin's national policy. *The Soviet people* concept was last mentioned in official documents in the resolution of the plenum of the CPSU Central Committee held in September 1989.

The concept of *the Soviet people* helped to integrate different nationalities inhabiting vast territories. The whole multi-ethnic country was viewed as one single entity and one single people. The unifying factors were the single language of communication — the Russian language, as well as a single army and a single national economy. The process of interethnic contacts became intensive, especially in large settlements. Mixed national marriages in the post-war period became a common reality in the USSR.

Nevertheless, the concept of *the united Soviet people* that was formed and almost consolidated in the national consciousness did not acquire the characteristics of a postulate. The policy of the ruling party itself on this issue laid the foundation for doubts and, as the time went by, for resistance to universal denationalization. The national culture suffered first. The unity of nations was repeatedly emphasized in cultural objects of the Soviet period (ranging from Soviet films and novels to fountains with corresponding names).

Rapid development of a new community and erasing of national borders were typical primarily in the pre-war period. The Soviet generation of pre-war Stalin's period, the promoters of the new national policy, perished on the fronts of the Great Patriotic War. And it became more difficult to build a new community. At that time, the peoples of the USSR were united in solving the task of restoring a single economy ruined by the war. Though later it became more difficult to maintain unity. In the Brezhnev period, *the united Soviet people* discourse began to acquire the character of propaganda. Internationalism as the propaganda pattern was to extend the national past, interest in native culture, language and literature. Cultural artifacts, customs and phenomena associated with national traditions were on the rise again.

There is a problem of existence of a nation that would provide a language and foundations of culture, social habits and moral norms for that community. Russia became such a nation, receiving the title "the elder brother" in Stalin's time. On the other hand, it gave a reason to speak about "Russification" of the non-Russian population of the USSR, and the "Russification" of the rest of the USSR population became one of the core subjects for research for Western Sovietology. We should take into consideration that processes of constructing the nations and national identities took place with artificially caused misbalances; for example, the incomplete realization of other nations' rights for self-determination. The problems of national construction, existing in some specific form in any country of the world, not only in the USSR, were extensively used by Western scholars for politically motivated speculations. National construction process in the USSR was called "excessive Russification of national cultures with widespread introduction of the Russian language and careless attitude to national languages and cultures" [7]. The reasons were following: coexistence of cultures in a multinational union with the leading role of the Russian language in eradicating illiteracy and its positions in science, technology and culture of less developed national minorities [7]. Western observers often claimed that "excessive Russification of national cultures" was counterproductive and led to the opposite result in the late twentieth century. Conflict of interests in the national past, language, culture and customs was the ground for attempts to escape from the old "unified community", served as a catalyst for ethnic and regional conflicts [1].

## V. CONCLUSIONS

Phenomenon of *the Soviet people* being a contradiction to postulates of social theory dealing with nation building happened to be more tenacious than it is represented by theorists. Today, ethnic communities living in Russia are united by common Soviet past, spiritual values, cultural priorities, and this cannot be denied. It has been 25 years since the destruction of the USSR, but more than half of the Russians surveyed (64%) would vote for preserving the USSR in the event of a referendum on this topic (March 2016 opinion poll by Russian Public Opinion Research Center) [12]. The Russian people and the President of the Russian Federation remain the core of unity. The concept of a supranational community as a

unified state has not disappeared. It was transformed into a new historical reality - *the Russian people*. The word *Russians* used by government officials in their public addresses no longer hurt the ears and is perceived as reality, as a fact of present life. The huge Russian space is still melting ethnic groups, nations and nationalities in a single pot, turning them into a single whole. Well, the name of this whole is just a matter of nuances of terminology.

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