“Socialism in One Country”
Promoting National Identity Based on Class Identification

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The Russian Empire of the Romanovs spanned thousands of miles from the Baltic to the Pacific, with a population of millions drawn from dozens of ethnic groups. Following the Russian Civil War, the Bolsheviks inherited the problem of holding together such a heterogeneous body. At the same time, they were forced to uphold Marxist ideology demanding worldwide revolution of the proletariat while facing the reality that despite the turmoil following the First World War no such revolution was forthcoming. In 1924 the rising Joseph Stalin, along with Nikolai Bukharin, devised the theory of “Socialism in One Country” which would become the solution to many of these problems facing the Bolsheviks. First of all, it proclaimed the ability of socialism to succeed in the Soviet Union alone, without foreign aid. Additionally, it marked a change from Lenin’s policy of self-determination for the Soviet Union’s constituent nations to Stalin’s policy of a compulsory unitary state. These non-Russian ethnics were systematically and firmly incorporated into the Soviet Union by the promotion of a proletariat class mentality. The development of the theory and policy of “Socialism in One Country” thus served to forge the unitary national identity of the Soviet Union around the concept of common Soviet class identity.

The examination of this policy’s role in building a new form of national identity is dependant on a variety of sources, grouped into several subject areas. First, the origin of the term “Socialism in One Country,” its original meaning and its interpretation can be found in the speeches and writings of prominent contemporary communist leaders, chief among them: Stalin and Trotsky. Second, outlines of the resulting policy can be found in a number of sources, many of the most insightful of which come from leftist writers such as E.H. Carr and François Furet. Third, interpretations of nationalism in the Soviet Union, especially concerning non-Russian nationalities within the Soviet Union, can be found in communist party proclamations and principally in a number of secondary sources. Finally, case studies of the Bolsheviks’ attempt to create Soviet-style nationalism based on class identity can be seen in the experiences of the Kazakhs and the small nationalities of Siberia during the 1920s and 1930s.

To consider the promotion of Soviet-style nationalism based on class identity, as opposed to nationalism’s classical orientation towards ethnicity, certain terms must first be defined. What is “nationalism?” In order to answer this question, a definition for “nation” is needed. A good definition is offered by Ronald Grigor Suny who terms it “a group of people that imagines itself to be a political community that is distinct from the rest of humankind, believes that it shares characteristics, perhaps original values, historical experiences, language, or any of many other elements, and on the basis of its defined culture deserves self-determination.”¹ From this, “nationalism” can be defined as the identification with a group of people based on common

political and social self-identification. Furthermore, a group that shares such a nationalist identity can be called a “nationality.”

This paper uses the term “nationalism” at times to refer to Soviet-style identification based on class consciousness, a usage altogether fitting for describing the situation that arose in the Soviet Union, as will be outlined. This is especially true since the definition chosen here for “nationalism” refers only to political and social identification, traits that were very much present in Soviet-style national identity.

However, the terms “nationalism,” and “nation” are commonly used with respect to “ethnicity,” as was Suny’s intention in the preceding passage. Thus, a definition for “ethnicity” can be extracted from the previous quotation as the identification within a group of people sharing a common language, culture, and who have historically lived together as a group. Finally, the term “class” must be clarified. I purport to define it as the shared identification of a common socio-economic position within society, rather than utilize the Marxist preference of defining the term with respect to the means of production.

The emergence of the theory of “Socialism in One Country” should be understood in the context of the challenges facing the Soviet Union during the early 1920s. The most glaring and theoretically challenging problem facing the Communists was the realization that no worldwide proletarian revolution would emerge in the near future. After attempts to spark a communist revolution in Germany proved unsuccessful, it was clear that the Soviet Union could not expect any immediate foreign support. It found itself a lone communist country in a world of capitalist states, many of which had proven demonstrably and actively hostile to the Bolshevik regime. This presented a tremendous theoretical challenge as classical Marxist doctrine held that an international proletarian revolution was necessary for the success of communism.

Further challenges for the Soviet Union stemmed from the country’s makeup. Russia lacked a large proletariat class, characteristic of an industrialized economy, which forms the classical base of support for communism. Lenin had countered this problem with his ‘Revolutionary Alliance’ whereby the Communists allied themselves and the country’s workers with the peasantry. However, the Soviet Union also lacked a widespread proletarian class identity. This was due to the fact that in addition to the lack of industrial workers, those that did exist tended to be recently converted peasants possessing little sense of kinship with other industrial workers, instead identifying with their agrarian background. Thus, were socialism to take lasting root in the Soviet Union, much would have to be done in terms of building a proletariat class identity.

The final major hurdle facing the Soviet Union was its inclusion of far more than Russian ethnics. The Soviet Union had essentially inherited the Czarist Empire, which had been composed of myriad non-Russian ethnic minorities, a number of which had clear desires for full independence. Allowing all these nationalities to secede was clearly not an option for the Soviet Union. According to the 1926 census approximately one third of the population lived outside the core Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and the country had a slight majority of

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3 Ibid.
Thus, the party was compelled to foster the integration of these smaller nationalities into Soviet society as a whole, and attempt to build a method of identification that could be shared by all nationalities of the Soviet Union, rather than solely Russians. The task of building such an identity around proletariat class consciousness was particularly difficult among many non-Russian nationalities, as they tended to live in significantly less industrialized conditions than the ethnically Russian majority.

Next, to examine the impact of the theory of “Socialism in One Country,” consider the established party doctrine which it replaced. Karl Marx had been first to express the need for socialism to be international in order to succeed. This was accepted throughout the communist party at the time of Lenin’s death, evidenced by the following passage taken from The ABC of Communism:

The communist revolution can be successful only as a world revolution. If a state of affairs arose in which one country was ruled by the working class, while in other countries the working class, not from fear but from conviction, remained submissive to capital, in the end the great robber States would crush the workers’ State of the first country.7

This stance attained full development in Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution. The term originated from Marx himself and was originally used to insist upon the necessity for workers to persevere through the preliminary bourgeoisie revolution to the eventual communist one.8 Trotsky’s theory focused on his belief that while revolution in Russia would begin as a bourgeoisie revolution, it would naturally bring about the socialist revolution, leading to the dictatorship of the proletariat.9 This theory was in fact very similar to the policy adopted by Lenin who, despite having previously disagreed with Trotsky’s theory, in 1917 urged the onslaught of a socialist revolution on top of the developing bourgeoisie one.10 However, Trotsky’s theory also encompassed the idea that “The completion of the socialist revolution within national limits is unthinkable.”11 This view may or may not have been completely shared by Lenin12, and it is quite possible that he did not hold to a single point of view on the matter over the course of his writings. Regardless, Trotsky’s theory articulated the widely held doctrine, among Bolsheviks, that the Soviet Union’s success was dependant on its identification with and active fostering of Marxist internationalism.

The theory of “Socialism in One Country” was conceived by Stalin as a response to this theory, rejecting the Soviet Union’s dependence on fostering international Marxism. In Stalin’s first treatment on the subject, “The October Revolution and the Tactics of the Russian Communists,” Stalin clearly expressed the opinion that Trotsky’s theory of Permanent

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8 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League,” London, March 1850.
11 Leon Trotsky, The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects, 279.
Revolution ran counter to Lenin’s theory of the proletariat revolution, going so far as to claim that “Trotsky’s theory of ‘permanent revolution’ is a variety of Menshevism.” Thus, the theory of “Socialism in One Country” was created in direct opposition to Trotsky’s theory. Trotsky acknowledged as much in his oft quoted passage declaring that, “the theory of socialism in one country… is the only theory that consistently and to the very end opposes the theory of the permanent revolution.”

In addition to “Socialism in One Country’s” origin as a response to Trotsky, the theory was also developed to serve another important purpose. Namely, it acknowledged the lack of an imminent worldwide revolution and addressed the problem by denying its necessity. This position was supported by the following key passage taken from Lenin’s writings: “the victory of socialism is possible first in several or even in one separate capitalist country.” While Lenin’s intentions in this passage have been thoroughly debated, what is important for our purposes is not whether he would have supported “Socialism in One Country,” but that the theory successfully developed the theoretical framework necessary to allow the Bolsheviks to address the Soviet Union’s practical realities—namely that they would have to succeed without any foreign assistance. Furthermore, a side effect of the theory was that it “reawakened a vague sentiment of national pride and patriotism,” something that will be considered in depth later in this paper.

The policies that emerged from the theory of “Socialism in One Country” are myriad, leading E.H. Carr to go so far as to say, while likely an exaggeration, that “Socialism in one country suddenly emerged as the master-key which unlocked every door and served as the touchstone by which every issue could be judged and clarified.” Of these numerous effects, certain key policies are particularly relevant to the examination of “Socialism in One Country’s” role in fostering Soviet national identity based on class identification. The first policy relates to the “one country” portion of the slogan. This allowed the slogan to be used as the theoretical justification for Stalin’s desire that the Soviet Union take the form of a purely unitary state rather than a federation. The second policy relates to the “socialism” portion of the slogan, serving to support the desire to “build socialism” in the Soviet Union. Thus the theory provided further theoretical backing for the building of the proletariat class in the Soviet Union, and especially for the promotion of identification with this class throughout the country.

These two policies combined to form the party’s position on constituent nations. These nations were not to be allowed to secede from the union or be granted further autonomy. Rather they were to be assimilated, and this was to be accomplished through the proletarization of their populaces. Stalin justified this policy, as he did the majority of policies emanating from “Socialism in One Country,” by claiming to follow Leninist doctrine:

14 Ibid., 189.
15 Leon Trotsky, The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects, 280.
19 Ibid., 60.
20 Ibid.
When Lenin speaks of the non-proletarian labouring masses led by the proletariat, he has in mind, not only the Russian peasants, but also the labouring elements living on the outskirts of the Soviet Union, living in those territories which, until recently, were nothing more than Russian colonies. Lenin was never weary of repeating that the Russian proletariat would not be victorious unless it secured these masses of other nationalities as allies.\textsuperscript{21}

By this interpretation of Leninist doctrine, Stalin proclaimed the importance of establishing a partnership with non-Russian ethnics within the Soviet Union, and hence the need for non-Russians to be incorporated and assimilated into the Soviet structure.

Following the Russian Revolution, non-Russian minorities had experienced a greater degree of autonomy than under the rule of the Czars. Contrary to Stalin’s interpretation of Lenin’s writings, Lenin had instituted a liberal policy of self-determination “which assumed that the Soviet federation consisted of ethnic groups, that all ethnic groups were entitled to their own duly demarcated territories, that all national territories should have political and cultural autonomy, and that the vigorous development of such autonomy was the only precondition for future unity.”\textsuperscript{22} This policy even allowed for the secession of certain national groups from the Soviet Union: “Lenin refused to oppose the independence of Finland, Poland, and, for a time, Ukraine and Georgia.”\textsuperscript{23} While this liberal stance was not shared by the entire party, a fairly lenient position was adopted at the Eighth All Party Congress in 1919:

The party recommends (as a transitional step towards complete union) a federative union of all the States which are organized on a soviet basis...With regard to the question, Who is entitled to express the will of a nation to secede, the Russian Communist Party adopts the historical class point of view, taking into account the stage of historical development which any particular nation happens to have reached\textsuperscript{24}

However, Lenin’s policy of permitting self-determination for ethnic minorities was not shared by Stalin, and the two had clashed over questions of Georgian nationalism.\textsuperscript{25} Stalin favored a unitary state rather than a federation or confederation of nations. With the advent of “Socialism in One Country,” Stalin acquired the theoretical framework to implement his policy towards minority nationalities. He rejected the ideas of autonomy or succession and attacked those who advocated greater independence for the various constituent nationalities:

the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics...is the forerunner of the coming union of the nations to form a worldwide economy. Hence the need for a struggle against the narrowness, the particularism, of those socialists in oppressed lands who cannot see beyond the boundaries of the parish in which they were born, and therefore fail to perceive the intimate connexion [sic.] between the movement for the liberation of their own country and the proletarian movement in the country by which it is ruled.\textsuperscript{26}

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\textsuperscript{22}Yuri Slezkine, Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small People of the North (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 154.  
\textsuperscript{23}Ronald Grigor Suny, The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successo, 141.  
\textsuperscript{26}Joseph Stalin, “Foundations of Leninism,” in Leninism, 142-43.
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Thus, Stalin not only pushed for the strengthening of the Soviet Union as a unitary state, but he also forwarded an agenda concerning identification. His attack on “particularism” was partially a refutation of ethnic nationalist sentiment, instead calling for a greater pan-nationalist identification with their hitherto oppressor nationality (Russians) to create a new Soviet-wide identity.

Stalin followed his theory of “Socialism in One Country” with efforts to integrate non-Russian nationalities into the Soviet Union through the promotion a proletariat identity. This technique had certain advantages; in the words of Ronald Grigor Suny: “Making nationality, like making class, can be seen as a complex process of creating an “imagined community”.” Both nationality and class are methods of identification formed by a group of similarly minded people. Thus, many of the processes that are used to promote one form of identification can be made to influence the other.

The techniques used by the Communists to create a proletariat class and proletarian class-consciousness during the period following the advent of “Socialism in One Country,” are fairly well known, therefore they will be only briefly detailed here. The wide scale industrialization of the country was paramount in the creation of an urban working class. These factories were further used as avenues for social and political indoctrination: “Soviet-style proletarianization meant acquiring industrial and political literacy...To attain such goals much faith was placed in the transformative powers of the factory system.”

The close knit grouping of workers during virtually every aspect of their lives allowed for concentrated indoctrination as well as the easy spread of ideas, resulting in constant pressure to conform to Party determined norms. Proletariat art, music, posters, painting, and all other means of expression were pushed strongly by the Bolsheviks. The glorification of the Stakhanovites was another tool, used to create a model for proletariat behavior and to give workers a sense that industrial (proletarian) work was praiseworthy. These processes were largely successful so that “within a period of less than sixty years, the workers of the most politically ‘backward’ European country were transformed from a small segment of a caste of peasant-serfs into Europe’s most class-conscious and revolutionary proletariat.”

A good illustration of the effects of “Socialism in One Country” policies on creating Soviet-style nationalism is the Bolsheviks’ attempt to assimilate the Kazaks into Soviet society. The Kazakh people at the time of the Russian Revolution were a non-industrialized, nomadic people who identified themselves primarily based on tribal or ethnic membership. In the late 1920s, as part of the general countrywide policy, an attempt was made to proletarize the Kazaks. The Turkestan-Siberian Railroad (Turksib) was to be the vehicle for this transformation. An effort was made to hire as many Kazakh workers as possible to work on building the railroad, however this effort was resisted by several of the involved groups. It was resisted by the Kazaks because they were being used as industrial workers, something to which

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they were both culturally and ideologically opposed; from the work managers for being forced to use less skilled labor; and from the European workers of the railroad for such reasons as racism, and fear of job loss to the Kazaks. While the Turksib initially experienced high turnover rates among Kazakh workers, the non-Kazakh workers and managers began to aid in the proletarization of the Kazaks. Language instruction and translation further integrated the Kazaks into the railroad’s industrial workforce. The Communists’ method also incorporated the less idealistic, though widely accepted (by party members), method of forcible compulsion. This included dekulakization whereby large numbers of prominent tribal families were rounded up and many executed, along with basic collectivization efforts, which shattered the nomads’ pastoral existence.

The efforts to proletarize the Kazaks were largely successful. A demonstration of this transformation can be found in the response to one of the Turkib work manager’s simple questions: “When S.M Ivanov [one of the Turksib work managers]…out of politeness, asked a Kazakh to name his clan, the Kazakh replied, “We are not from a clan, we are proletarians.” This is a striking demonstration of the effectiveness of the Communists’ policy. The Kazakh’s response came as quite a surprise to Ivanov, who had expected a straightforward answer in such a traditionally non-politicized arena where “Speaking Bolshevik” was extremely uncommon. It must be noted that this proletarizing process was characterized by forced industrialization and was accompanied to a certain extent by Russification. Nevertheless, the Kazakh’s experience proved a successful case of the promotion of Soviet-style nationalism through class identification: “The Kazaks did forge a new identity in the industrial establishments of the 1930s.”

Another example of the effect of “Socialism in One Country” is the experience of the small nationalities of northern Siberia. At the time of the Russian Revolution, these nationalities were “equally primitive and classless.” The people of Siberia did not identify with either Russian ethnic nationalism or Soviet proletarian consciousness. Following Stalin’s rise to power, and pursuant to the policies of “Socialism in One Country,” efforts were made to proletarize the Siberian peoples. However in this instance there was no great industrial project, rather the Communists attempted to collectivize the various nomadic nationalities. This effort was none too effective, in part because it resulted in widespread seizures of furs and meat from the Siberian peoples who depended on these commodities for their livelihood, and was further hindered by the process of dekulakization, which resulted in numerous deaths among the nomads. The absence of any unifying industrial project thus resulted in a failure to produce any sort of proletarian identity, and therefore was unable to promote a sense of Soviet national identity.

As seen by the experiences of the Kazakhs and Siberian peoples, the policy of creating a Soviet nationalist identity around common class identification produced mixed results. The

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33 Ibid., 232, 235-38
34 Ibid., 241.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Slezkine, 153.
38 Ibid., 190-97.
Communist Party became steeped in the language of maintaining a state governed by and in the interest of the proletariat. This rhetoric was dispersed throughout the populace through the process known as “Speaking Bolshevik.” Of course, while the veneer of language does not convey the entire underlying situation, the Communists were in fact successful in promoting a new Soviet-style “nationalist” identity.

Indeed, what stands out about the surprisingly powerful new national identity developed under Stalin was its Soviet, rather than solely Russian, character and how a sense of belonging to the Soviet Union was melded with the enhancement of a parallel, but subordinated, ethnic or national character...

Ethnic identities certainly remained in the Soviet Union, as was demonstrated by the eventual breakup of the Soviet Union into a plethora of smaller states. However, these ethnic identities were subordinated to a large Soviet identity, which was exemplified by such symbols as the Soviet flag.

While this success of the promotion of a Soviet wide “nationalist” identity is relatively clear, what is less evident is the extent to which a proletarian class identity, in the classical Marxist sense, was inculcated. Despite rapid industrialization and increase of the urban working class, much of the Soviet Union remained rural. The shared social identity of the Soviet Union might therefore be characterized as relatively fraternal, and representative of the earlier Revolutionary Alliance with the peasantry, rather than purely of a Marxist proletarian nature. It would be more correct to say that the national identity was based on a revamped conception of class identity, one which extended beyond the mentality of the industrial worker to include the common social and economic position of the country’s industrializing masses within the Soviet system. However, the term “proletariat” consciousness was still in common use at the time for this identity, signifying an evolution (what some have called a “vulgarization”) of the term from its Marxist origin to fit the developing realities of the Soviet Union. Thus, this paper’s definition of “class” as the shared identification of a common socio-economic position within society corresponds to the emergent Soviet identity.

The theory of “Socialism in One Country” originated as a response to Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution, however it was used by Stalin to create a theoretical justification for the practical realities facing the Soviet Union; it can thus be viewed as “a synthesis between socialist and national loyalties.” The resulting policy was an attempt to create a Soviet nationalist identity around shared proletarian identification. The constituent nations of the Soviet Union were thus brought into a unitary state, and a process of proletarization was undertaken to foster the desired Soviet nationalism. This policy found mixed results among less industrialized ethnic minorities, but on the whole was largely successful. Thus “Socialism in One Country” provided the theoretical framework for the successful policy of fostering Soviet nationalism based on socio-economic identification, rather than ethnicity.

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39 Kotkin, 230. Author’s italics.
40 For a discussion of the “paternalistic” system created by the Bolsheviks, see: Matthew Payne, Stalin’s Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism, 276-285; and Stephen Kotkin, Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization, 157-279.
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