

# ***Everything You Always Wanted to Know About (Ukrainian) Nationalism, But Were Afraid to Ask Lenin***

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## **The Great Ukrainian**

A few years ago a syndicated TV project *The Great Ukrainians* was aired at one of the national channels. The idea of the project was very simple: the whole nation, which was represented by a TV-audience, elected its most important historical figures. The project failed in Ukraine; it did not, as it was predicated by its promoters, generate any serious political discussion. It was a rather boring version of the political talk-shows, which after the Orange revolution used to be very dramatic. The only episode that somehow broke the smooth surface was a brief confrontation between the leader of the parliamentary Communist party, the corrupted Soviet “Left” that quickly joined the coalition of the big capital parties, and a leading researcher in the program, a liberal historian. The former claimed that Lenin should be included among the great Ukrainians, because he was at the roots of Ukraine’s independence. The latter repudiated, explaining that Lenin was internationalist, and therefore his ultimate goal was the world revolution and not the independence of Ukraine.

This brief appearance of Lenin, which surprised some and annoyed others (and probably, was unnoticed by others), is interesting in two respects. Firstly, it made perceptible the absence of Lenin from popular imagination. The collapse of the Soviet Union was followed by a total “de-Leninization,” which lasted till today. One of the few exceptions to this tendency is Slavoj Žižek’s *13 Essays on Lenin*, which he published on the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution<sup>1</sup>. However, reading this essay makes you wonder, as in Žižek’s favourite anecdote, “Where is Lenin?”.

The other reason, why this brief TV dialog is interesting is that it ironically reverses the important discussion on Lenin’s nationality politics that emerged during the 60s in Ukraine. This discussion was most eloquently set forth in the text *Internationalism or Russification?*(1965) by literary critic Ivan Dzyuba<sup>2</sup>. While Dzyuba presented Lenin as a national liberator, the Soviet officials repudiated this in a similar way as the liberal historian in the TV program. In addition, they accused Dzyuba of “nationalism.”

Generally, communism as ideology is seen as the total opposite of nationalism. One often accounts the statement that the most vivid effect of the “collapse of communism” has been the rise of nationalism, as if simply the label “scientific communism” was replaced with “scientific nationalism,” as it had been suggested by one representative of the Soviet state apparatus in the early 90s. But something important is excluded from this opposition between communism and nationalism: that under imperialism the national question acquires a class dimension. And this is one of the main ideas that defined Lenin’s politics toward nationalities. Lenin not only supported the right of nations to self-determination but also gave it Marxist grounds. Although his approach to the national question was not without contradictions, Lenin sympathised with the struggles of the oppressed nations against imperialism. In his debate with Luxembourg he defended national-liberation movements, defined them as progressive and saw the possibility (and the necessity) to link them with the class struggles of the proletariat, instead of opposing the two.

## **Purloined letter**

While supporting the oppressed nations’ right to secession in his *The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination* (1916), Lenin believed that once granted this right, the oppressed nation would not exercise it because of the benefits of being part of a bigger centralized system of a progressive democratic character. Lenin’s this “give-and-take away”

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek. *Die Revolution steht bevor. Dreizehn Versuche über Lenin*. Frankfurt Am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Ivan Dzyuba. *Internatsionalizm chy Rusyfikatsia?*. Kiev, 2005.

politics was immediately criticised by Ukrainian communist Leon Yurkevych, whose texts recently became accessible.<sup>3</sup>

However in his last years Lenin revised his nationality politics. He did it in his letter which is now known under the title "The Question of Nationalities or 'Autonomisation.'" The letter was dictated by Lenin during the last two days of December 1922. This was the only medium of communication he had access to. Lenin attributed considerable importance to these notes, which he wanted to elaborate into an article. He was never able to do it. The letter was presented at the XII Congress of the Communist party on 16 April 1923, and then disappeared. It was "found" only after Stalin's death and published in 1956.<sup>4</sup>

This letter is central to Dzyuba's argumentation in *Internationalism or Russification?*. It is an extended elaboration of the main ideas in Lenin's notes from the historical distance of almost half a century. In a way, this is the article that was never written by Lenin.

Why does the national question bother dying Lenin? Firstly, he was very upset with the so called "Georgian affair," the conflict with the Communist Party of Georgia in autumn 1922 on the issue of the creation of a Transcaucasian federation. Instead of regulating this conflict, Central Committee's representatives Ordzhonikidze and Stalin (Russified Georgians, as Lenin points in brackets) suppressed it. Secondly, Lenin felt that something was going on that he did not have much influence on. The letter starts with the phrase: "I seem to be very guilty against Russian workers for not actively and abruptly intruding in the notorious question of autonomisation, which is officially called, it seems, the question of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics."<sup>5</sup>

It seems that Lenin's position varies from the first to the second day he wrote the letter. At the beginning of the letter Lenin condemns "the venture of autonomisation" for being conceptually wrong and not being proper in the current situation. At the conclusion of the letter he gives practical recommendations that begin with the affirmation of the union of socialist republics (if by this Lenin means the same union). A union is "needed for the struggle of the world proletariat against the world bourgeoisie," explains Lenin, but in the fourth and the last exhortation, which is much longer and twisted, he emphasises the necessity to fight the abuses of the "truly Russian character," going as far as the possibility of restoring the full independence of republics aside from the military and diplomatic union. The necessity to unify against Western imperialism, warns Lenin, should not justify imperialistic relations with "oppressed nations." He finishes the letter with a prediction, which explains why the national question had such weight at that moment: "Tomorrow in the world history will be precisely this day, when the nations oppressed by imperialism will fully awaken and the decisive, long, and difficult struggle for their liberation will start."<sup>6</sup>

Generally there are two opposite understandings of internationalism. According to one, it means the abolition of all national differences, and return to an innocent state before the "confusion of tongues." Lenin called this "national nihilism." The other understanding of internationalism, which was developed by Lenin, saw it as the fullest development of all nations. In order to achieve this Lenin suggests a mechanism of compensation that would later be known as "positive discrimination":

I have already written in my works about the national question that the abstract formulation of the question of nationalism is totally false. One should differentiate

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<sup>3</sup> Lev (Yurkevych) Rybalka. *Russian Social Democrats and the National Question*. 1917.

<http://thecommu.wordpress.com/2009/08/31/two-rare-texts-on-the-national-question/>

<sup>4</sup> This letter together with some others was published in *Communist*, 1956, Issue 9, and was included in the additional volumes of *Complete Works*. V.I. Lenin, "The Question of Nationalities or 'Autonomisation,'" in the *Collected Works*, Volume 36, Moscow 1971, pp. 605-11. I am citing from the Ukrainian translation: V.I. Lenin, "The Question of Nationalities or 'Autonomisation,'" in the *Collected Works*, Volume 45, Kiev 1974, pp. 339-45. The English translation was published at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/dec/testamnt/autonomy.htm>

<sup>5</sup> V.I. Lenin. "The Question of Nationalities or 'Autonomisation,'" p. 339. (My translation.)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 345.

between the nationalism of the oppressing nation and the nationalism of the oppressed nation, the nationalism of the big nation and the nationalism of the small nation. Concerning the second nationalism, almost always in historical practice we, representatives of the big nation turn to be deeply guilty of numerous acts of violence, moreover we continue committing numerous offences and acts of violence which remain imperceptible for us... That is why internationalism from the side of the oppressing nation ... should consist not only in adhering to the formal equality of nations but in such an inequality that compensates at the expense of the oppressing nation, the big nation, that inequality which actually exists in life. Those who did not understand this missed the point of the true proletarian attitude toward the national question and retained the petit-bourgeois point of view and that is why they cannot but regress all the time to the bourgeois point of view.<sup>7</sup>

While Lenin did not have to justify his understanding of internationalism, Dzyuba presents an ethical argumentation for it, which can be summarized in four positions: firstly, the universal is accessible only through the particular, in this case through the national; secondly, if communism appropriates all the best produced by humanity, it cannot reject national languages and traditions; thirdly, the abolition of any nation deprives it of the possibility to contribute to cultural development and condemns it to cultural dependency. Moreover, the abolition of all nations hits only small, oppressed nations. Big, or oppressor nations usually reserve for themselves positions above the national, that of universal humanity. Dzyuba cites Marx's letter to Engels from 20 June 1866, in which he described how the representatives of the Young France believed that those, who complicated the social questions with "the prejudices of the old world" such as national questions, were by definition reactionaries. Marx commented that Lafargue and others who abolished the nation were proclaiming this in French and by abolition of nations they understood the assimilation of all nations by the French "model."<sup>8</sup> This is what Dzyuba calls "assimilation of small, oppressed nations by the big, oppressor nation."

As a literary critic Dzyuba pays most but not exclusive attention to the cultural field, which he reads politically. One of the main examples to the perversion of proletarian internationalism he diagnosed in the current nationality politics of the Soviet Union was the revision of history in terms of the rehabilitation of the Russian Empire, "the owner of the great length of the stolen land" as Engels called it. Dzyuba opposes negative accessions of Russian imperialism by classics of Marxism-Leninism and Russian liberal democrats (Gertsen, Chernyshevsky) to the Soviet worship of the "heroic doings of the Russian people." Dzyuba points out the ideological trick that Stalinism played on the Marxist understanding of history: replacing the Tsar as an agent of action with Russian people helps to ascribe progressive character to all imperialistic "steals," presenting them as a voluntary unification with the Russian people. The grandiose celebration of the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the "unification" of the Ukrainian people with their Russian elder brother, the *Perejaslavska Rada* of 1654, was fresh in memory at the time when Dzyuba was writing his work.<sup>9</sup>

### **Non-historic peoples?**

One of the symptoms of the radical reversal of Lenin's nationality politics under Stalin was the actualisation of the Hegelian notion of "non-historic peoples." This notion was not new for Marxism. In 1848-9 Engels used it for Slavs, who joined the counter-revolution in the Habsburg Empire. Angrily Engels proclaimed that they should be swiped away by history. In 1949, Roman Rozdolsky, one of the communist leaders from Western Ukraine who had just immigrated to USA, wrote a detailed criticism of Engel's position regarding this question. He showed that Engels

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. pp. 341-2.

<sup>8</sup> Cited from Ivan Dzyuba. *Internationalism or Russification?*. Kiev, 2005, p. 75.

<sup>9</sup> About the construction of this 'unification' see Serhy Yekelchuk. *Stalin's Empire of Memory: Russian-Ukrainian Relations in the Soviet Historical Imagination*. Toronto: Toronto UP, 2004.

missed the articulation of nation and class in the case of Austrian Slavs, who were peasants and who were never offered a liberation by a revolutionary bourgeoisie.<sup>10</sup>

As David Brandenberger observes, by the mid 30s the Stalinist regime ascribed the ability of state-building only to the Russian people, while the non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union only had pasts.<sup>11</sup> Officially this did not mean the immediate physical annihilation of these non-historic peoples, on the contrary, before being “progressively” swiped away by history they were to experience a blossoming to the full, so they would not be upset when they disappeared without a trace.

In contrast to Lenin’s nationality politics that was known as indigenization (*korenizatsia*, Ukrainisation) and was directed at the active compensation of national inequality, Stalin developed the formula “national in form, socialistic in content,” the perfect embodiment of which were the so called “*kolkhoz-musicales*.” In *Traktorysty* (1939) by Ivan Pyriev, happy Ukrainian collective farmers regularly interrupted their joyous building of socialism to dance and sing Ukrainian folk numbers. The function of these “staged” ethnographic differences was to create a hierarchy of peoples crowned by “the first among equal,” as Stalin called the Russian people. The “liberal” character of this hierarchy consisted in the possibility to nationally “upgrade.” In Soviet passports the definition of ethnicity was obligatory, but one could freely choose it. Surprisingly, many representatives of non-historic peoples eagerly reverted to the “progressive” nation by assuming Russian identity, language and loyalty. This new identity was not another ethnographic nation, not an essentialist and romantic image of the Russian people; it was the Soviet nation, deprived of any national pathology. However, as David Brandenberger points out, by the late forties and early fifties the “routine conflation of ‘Russian’ and ‘Soviet’ meant that in many cases, patriotic pro-Soviet sentiments almost had to be expressed in Russo-centric terms.”<sup>12</sup>

One of the powerful de-Stalinization currents of the Thaw developed in opposition to this universalizing project, to search an authentic national identity. This movement was distinctly conservative, traditionalistic and ethnographic, and at the same time it was youthful, lively and passionate. Interestingly, it covered not only non-Russian Republics, but also Russia itself.

In Ukraine this drive for an authentic national culture was expressed in art, especially in cinema, in what was called “Kyiv School of poetic cinema.” The recognized cornerstone of the school was the film *The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1964) by Sergei Parajanov. An Armenian born in Georgia, Parajanov, after studying film in Moscow chose to live and work in Ukraine, and after a number of mediocre films at Kyiv Film Studios he suddenly made one of the biggest aesthetic breakthroughs that became the second most famous Ukrainian film after *The Earth* by Dovzhenko, whom Parajanov considered to be his teacher.

*The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* had been shot at the Ukrainian part of the Carpathian mountains seized by Stalin in 1939. The film portrays the material culture of a small ethnic group – Hutsuls – who, as an official reviewer of the film noted, “preserved their cultural originality despite the ... century-long oppression by Austrian colonists.”<sup>13</sup> Together with artist Georgiy Yakutovych, and actor Ivan Mykolaichyk, who loved and knew very well Hutsuls’ culture, and with the help of the “unchained” camera of cameraman Yury Illenko, Parajanov made this film about a non-historic people so full of life, that the Soviet reality paled. It was not an ethnographic “zoo,” a mummified “national difference” produced to sustain imperialistic hierarchy, but a full-fledged “wild” culture. The past was dangerously unfrozen.

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<sup>10</sup> Roman Rosdolsky, *Engels and the ‘Nonhistoric’ Peoples: the National Question in the Revolution of 1848*, Critique, Glasgow, 1987. See also the review of the book in *Revolutionary History*, Vol.3 No.2, Autumn 1990.  
<http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/backiss/vol3/no2/rosdolsk.html>

<sup>11</sup> David L Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern National Identity, 1931 – 1956*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2002, p. 93.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 238.

<sup>13</sup> Mikhail Bleiman. “Archaists or Innovators?” in *Iscusstvo Kino*, no 7, 1970, p. 56.

It is difficult to overestimate the effect of this bright, lively film, an aesthetic bomb, which smashed the canon of Soviet narrative films, the Hollywood-Mosfilm style, as Godard once called it. Initially *The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* was very successful both inside the Soviet Union (Moscow liked it) and outside it (the film was awarded at the film festival at Mar-del-Plata in Argentina, and in France it was successfully running in cinemas under the title *Les Chevaux de Feu*). However, very soon the film and its director provoked the suspicion of the authorities.

Numerous memoirs about Parajanov, who was the epicentre of unofficial cultural in Kyiv during the 60s, prove that he not only felt a deep disdain toward Soviet power, but also used every opportunity to show it. For example, the producer of *The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, who was also the “political supervisor” of the crew, remembered that during the preparation of the setting for the scene in “*korchma*” (a local pub), Parajanov was not satisfied with Franz Joseph I’s portrait that was placed on the wall as a sign of loyalty to imperial power. He said, “Let’s hang some corn around him, he was a corn-lover like ours,” referring to Khrushchev’s somewhat ridiculous fascination with American corn.<sup>14</sup>

The film was finished when Khrushchev was dismissed. In the summer of 1965 the first wave of political arrests rolled over Ukraine. A small group of young Ukrainian intellectuals, Ivan Dzyuba among them, decided to publicly protest against it. They chose to do it at the Ukrainian premiere of *The Shadows of forgotten Ancestors*. In the “explanation note” to the higher authorities, the administrator of the cinema which hosted screening on 4 September 1965 wrote that after the planned presentation of the film crew, a young man came out on the stage, gave flowers to one of the women from the crew, took the microphone and started proclaiming “nationalistic and anti-Soviet words, which sounded like the following: Comrades! The reaction of 1937 has come. There are arrests of Ukrainian intelligentsia all over Ukraine; writers, poets, artists were arrested. Groups of people were arrested in Kyiv and Lviv. The mothers of Ukraine are in sorrow for their sons. Shame to authorities! Those, who support us, rise up to express their protest.”<sup>15</sup> Only few people got up, other started shouting at the “hooligans,” a few left the hall and the majority were silent. Parajanov did not know about this in advance, and was joking that Dzyuba “spoiled” his premiere.

It was after this failed public protest witnessing the increasing political repressions Dzyuba wrote his *Internationalism or Russification?*. This book-length exegesis on communist nationality politics was accomplished in four months. On 8 December 1965 Dzyuba sent it together with an open letter to the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Ukraine. The text became a “hit” of Ukrainian unofficial self-publishing “*samvydav*” and was smuggled beyond the Iron Curtain. It was translated into English, Italian, and French.

Although Dzyuba and Parajanov had a deep friendship and mutual respect, Parajanov, according to Dzyuba’s wife, did not approve of the activity of “Ukrainian nationalists” as he called them. He was jokingly saying: “We already had one Lenin, it’s enough.”<sup>16</sup> Parajanov was not interested in politics, but he was obsessed with art, which sometimes can become a political question. For example, Parajanov refused to translate *The Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* into Russian. He was in love with music, especially opera, and it was critical to preserve the sound of the authentic dialect of Hutsuls. Translation into Russian was obligatory for every film produced at the republican film studios (if the film was not already in Russian). Parajanov’s disobedience could look like a political protest, but it was done for purely aesthetic reasons.

In 1973 Parajanov was arrested in Kyiv and was accused of homosexuality, then a crime, and sentenced to five years in labour camps. It is commonly accepted now that the real motive for this repression was political, just displaced into the “dirty” sexual field to humiliate Parajanov and alienate his friends. However, Parajanov liked to openly declare his homosexuality to his friends, while a lot of them were sure that he was just pretending, because he was pretending all the

<sup>14</sup> Volodymyr Lugovsky. *Unknown Maestro*. Kyiv, 1998, pp. 97-99.

<sup>15</sup> *Poetic Cinema: Forbidden School*, ed. by Larysa Bryukhovetska. Kyiv, 2001, p. 269.

<sup>16</sup> Martha Dzyuba. “Sergiy Parajanov” in *Kino-Teatr*, 4 (78), 2008, p. 18.

time. Although Ukraine was the first country to abolish criminalization of homosexuality after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Parajanov, who got official recognition and became a cult figure of the “nationalist” discourse, is not rehabilitated yet. As soon as the process of rehabilitation was initiated by his widow, his son was arrested and sentenced to three years for drug-dealing. This revealed the true face of the repressive state apparatus of a “democratic and independent” Ukraine that is supposedly ruled by new “nationalists.”

Both Dzyuba and Parajanov suffered political repressions, firstly in a concealed form through not being allowed to work in the cultural field. Dzyuba was denied a PhD candidate status in the Institute of Literature and Parajanov was not granted an approval for his next film-script, *Kyiv Frescos*. Dzyuba helped Parajanov to write a letter to the authorities, explaining how important it is for an artist to be able to create.<sup>17</sup> In 1970 the central film journal *Iskusstvo Kino* published an extensive review by Moscow based professor of film, an authoritative voice, Mikhail Bleiman, in which he denounced the “School” as an ideological mistake.<sup>18</sup> Dzyuba wrote an answer, in which he argued against the persecution of an aesthetic school as if it was an anti-Soviet conspiracy.<sup>19</sup> Dzyuba was able to publish this article only in 1989, because he was himself arrested and accused of anti-Soviet propaganda. Unlike Parajanov, Dzyuba was released, but the only job he was able to get was as a proofreader in a factory newspaper.

It seems that after history itself repudiated the term non-historic peoples it should lose any appeal today. This is not the case. In his textbook on Marxism, with the ironic subtitle “Not Recommended For Learning,” which was published in Moscow in 2006, contemporary Russian Marxist Boris Kagarlitsky dedicates the last chapter to the national question. Here he uses the term non-historic peoples, believing that it is very relevant in the current situation. He says, “The struggle for the official language looks ridiculous in 21<sup>st</sup> century.” Five pages latter he is even more severe: “This striving to become “valuable” nations in the new epoch, when the other questions are in the foreground, become reactionary.”<sup>20</sup> The examples to such “ridiculous” and “reactionary” non-historic peoples that he gives in passim are Ireland and Ukraine.

Kagarlitsky explains that now “the appearance of new states leads to creation of new borders, the split of formerly unified workers or, to talk in contemporary language, destruction of the formed economic relations.”<sup>21</sup> He does not, however, explain what precisely changed from the time, when Marx said to British workers, that an oppressor nation can never become free, therefore the liberation of the Irish people is a priority for the British working class. To prove the irrelevance of national endeavours for the current situation, Kagarlitsky asserts that the “proletariat is striving to set the unity of action, to overcome borders, national and tribal barriers.”<sup>22</sup> Aside from being as new as the *Communist Manifesto* this statement totally ignores that today it is not the proletariat, who sets “the unity of action.” It is capital in its global imperialistic stage that “overcomes borders, national and tribal barriers.”

The interpretation of the national question by Kagarlytsky, which is not uncommon among post-Soviet New Left, reveals a typical double thinking, a symptom of the imperialist unconscious. Not surprisingly Kagarlytsky rejects any possibility to see the Soviet Union as an imperial system. While the phenomenon of Stalinist Orientalism gains recognition among historians of the Soviet Union<sup>23</sup>, in Kagarlytsky’s opinion all the peoples of the Soviet Union were in an equal situation, they “equally suffered from the ‘defects’ of the Soviet system.” This also implies that the concept of “non-historic peoples” is empirically proved.

<sup>17</sup> “A letter by S. Paradjanov to the secretary of Central Committee of CPU F.D.Ovcharenko” in *Parajanov: Flight, Tragedy, Eternity*, ed by R. Korogodsky, S. Shcherbatiok. Kyiv, 1994, pp. 182-85.

<sup>18</sup> Mikhail Bleiman. “Archaists or Innovators?” in *Iskusstvo Kino*, no 7, 1970, pp. 55-76.

<sup>19</sup> Ivan Dzyuba. “Opening or Closing of the School?” in *Poetic Cinema: Forbidden School*, ed. by Larisa Bryukhovetska. Kyiv, 2001, pp. 209-28.

<sup>20</sup> Boris Kagarlitsky. *Marxism, Not Recommended For Learning*. Moscow, 2006, pp. 391, 396.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 396.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> David L Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*, p. 400.

### “The right to post-colonial discourse”

About ten years ago another discussion revealed a different take on Russian imperialism. In 2001 Russian curator Ekaterina Degot published in *Art Margins* a short and provocative text under the title “How to Qualify for Postcolonial Discourse?” complaining that “Russia” is “othered” by the West, but simultaneously deprived of the “right” to talk in the name of the other.<sup>24</sup> The same text was also published under a slightly different title, which formulates the question better: “How to obtain the right to Post-Colonial discourse?”<sup>25</sup> Degot is probably right in what she is saying in this article, but she is wrong in what she is not saying. And this was said by her opponent, Margaret Dikovitskaya, who claimed that Russia can “qualify” for postcolonial discourse only as the subject, the colonizer, and not as an object, the colonized. It seemed that Dikovitskaya was not at all critical of this status, but she was simply trying to say that it was a wrong strategy, or, as she formulated it “Russian humanities will not get anything from joining the club of postcolonial studies folks.”<sup>26</sup> Instead of demanding the right to being the “other,” she suggested Russia presents itself as “another,” one among “us.”

It is difficult to decide whose position is more imperialistic. On the one hand, Degot represented the self-victimisation discourse, which is an outcome of the mourning for the loss of the universal position. But suffering traumatic nationalisation (othering), she ignores one important detail, that the lost universality was constructed at the expense of its own nationalised others. On the other hand, Dikovitskaya presented a neoliberal neo-colonialist position, according to which Russia has a right to join the cultural G8 as “another” (as is well known, the conflict between the oppressors is always less insurmountable than the conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union it is common among historians to approach it as an empire. As Mark Beissinger ironically noted, “A polity that was once universally recognized as a state came to be universally condemned as an empire.”<sup>27</sup>

Based on a comparative study of empires Frederic Cooper concluded that their nationality politics are defined by the tension between two opposite tendencies – that of incorporation and that of differentiation. And the articulation between the two varies:

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<sup>24</sup> Ekaterina Dyogot. “How to Qualify for Postcolonial Discourse?” *Art Margins*, 01 November 2001.  
<http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/2-articles/325-how-to-qualify-for-postcolonial-discourse>.

<sup>25</sup> Ekaterina Degot. “How to Obtain the Right to Post-Colonial Discourse?” *Art Magazine*.  
[http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/moscow-art-magazine/how-to-obtain-the-right/view\\_print/](http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/moscow-art-magazine/how-to-obtain-the-right/view_print/)

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Dikovitskaya. “A Response to Ekaterina Dyogot’s Article: Does Russia Qualify for Postcolonial Discourse?” *Art Margins*, 30 January 2002.  
<http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/2-articles/324-a-response-to-ekaterina-dyogots-article-does-russia-qualify-for-postcolonial-discourse>

<sup>27</sup> Mark Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*. N.Y.: Cambridge UP, 2002, p. 35. See also *Nationalism and Empire: The Habsburg Monarchy and the Soviet Union*. Ed. by Richard Rudolph and David Good. N.Y.: St.Martin’s, 1992. *Nationalism and the Breakup of an Empire: Russia and Its Periphery*, ed. by Miron Rezun. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1992. *After the Soviet Union: From Empire to Nations*, ed. by Timothy J. Colton and Robert Legvold. N.Y.: Norton, 1992. *The Post-Soviet Nations: Perspectives on the Demise of the USSR*, ed. by Alexandr J. Motyl. N.Y.: Columbia UP, 1992. *Thinking Theoretically About Soviet Nationalities: History and Comparison in the Study of the USSR*, ed. by Alexandr Motyl, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1992. Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, *The End of Soviet Empire: The Triumph of Nations*, trans. Franklin Philip. N.Y.: Basic Books, 1993. Roland Grigor Suny, *Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford UP, 1993. In *a Collapsing Empire: Underdevelopment, Ethnic Conflicts, and Nationalism in the Soviet Union*. Ed by Marco Buttino, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1993. Robert J. Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and USSR*. Princeton, 1994. *The End of Empire? The Transformation of the USSR in Comparative Perspective*, ed. by Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrot, Armonk, N.Y.: Sharpe, 1997. *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation Building: the Soviet Union and Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires*. Ed. by Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen. Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1997. Alexandr J. Motyl, *Revolutions, Nations, Empires: Conceptual Limits and Theoretical Possibilities*. N.Y.: Columbia UP, 1999. Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in Soviet Union, 1923 – 1939*. Ithaca, 2001. Alexandr J. Motyl, *Imperial Ends: The Decay, Collapse, and Revival of Empires*. N.Y.: Columbia UP, 2001. *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*. ed. by Ronald Grigor Suny, and Terry Martin. Oxford University Press, 2001. Serhy Yekelchuk, *Stalin’s Empire of Memory: Russian-Ukrainian Relations in the Soviet Historical Imagination*.

Where to find a balance between the poles of incorporation (the empire's claim that its subjects belonged within the empire) and differentiation (the empire's claim that different subjects should be governed differently) was a matter of dispute and shifting strategies. ... The most extreme example of the pendulum swinging toward dichotomous differentiation rather than a tension of incorporation and differentiation was Nazi Germany, and there the division between German and non-German was as much within national territory as in zones of conquest. And the Thousand-Year Reich proved short-lived, in the face of the resources of the British and Soviet imperial systems, and of the empire-in-spite-of-itself, the United States.<sup>28</sup>

If the Soviet Union could be qualified as an empire, which seems to be a consensus among the historians, it is rather a strange one. It also manifested a third tendency, which contradicted both. Originating in Lenin's internationalist politics, it never fully disappeared, even if it was just a discursive screen that covered the actual national inequality. The Soviet Union was presenting itself not as an ethnic state or empire, but as a new type of state, based on internationalist principles. However, its "internationalism" was not without contradictions. It proclaimed the creation of the new nation, the Soviet people. Like any nation-building project it was based on one language (Russian), one administrative centre (Moscow) and ascribed to itself certain exclusive features (its own superiority toward other peoples). Human recourses for this nation-building were provided by other peoples ("assimilation of the small, oppressed nation by the big, oppressor nation").

Terry Martin proposed a special concept for this strange case: "Affirmative Action Empire."<sup>29</sup> National republics resembled "independent states that lost their independence." The right to secession was guaranteed by the Soviet Constitution, but no peoples "wanted" to exercise it.

As post-colonialist criticism had persuasively showed, imperialism always utilizes certain unconscious optics, which work for its own invisibility by disseminating the myth of the universality of the colonizer and positioning itself above the nationality and ideology of nationalism. It can naturalise itself or even present itself as a liberation. The former was the case with Soviet imperialism, which was seen as a "distant horizon," a utopia, communism.<sup>30</sup>

One might wonder whether the national question is still relevant today, as it was in Lenin's or Dzyuba's times. Is not the national question hopelessly obsolete (or even reactionary!), as Kagarlytsky argues, now, almost twenty years after the Soviet Union gave birth to fifteen independent states that belong to capitalism? Is it not better to qualify any questioning of nationality politics in respect to the Soviet Union as nationalist and dismiss it on these grounds?

As Lenin liked to emphasise, turning a blind eye to one's own mistakes is much worse than making them. If the New Left wants to demise global neo-imperialism, it has to propose a viable alternative to it, which is impossible without a rigorous criticism of the historical experience of the Soviet Union.

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<sup>28</sup> Frederick Cooper. *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*. University of California Press, 2005, p. 154.

<sup>29</sup> Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in Soviet Union, 1923 – 1939*. Ithaca, 2001. See also Terry Martin. "An Affirmative Action Empire: The Soviet Union as the Highest Form of Imperialism" in *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*. Ed. by Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin. Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 67-90.

<sup>30</sup> Is it possible that capitalism comes after communism? 'Communism' signifies here not a social formation but a name of the ruling party, which are not identical. Whatever was lost under the signifier 'Communism' it was an overwhelming for the Left, which is still under the spell of 'progressive nostalgia'. This is another paradox. Nostalgia, fixation on the loss, is always regressive. It is conservative by definition. When projected on the society nostalgia perceives the loss as an accident. Its optics precludes it from seeing determination that springs from the internal contradictions. It is this contradictory character of the past that nostalgia fails to acknowledge. The crucial question is not how to accept the loss, but how to overcome the very formulation of the past in terms of loss.