

Chapter 7

THE TENACITY OF FORMS: LANGUAGE, NATION, STALIN

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... the beginner who has learnt a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he has assimilated the spirit of the new language and can produce freely in it only when he moves in it without remembering the old and forgets in it his ancestral tongue.

Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire”

Introduction

To understand the national question in Soviet history ultimately means to know the scholarship that informed it. Among the most important of the scholars, perhaps surprisingly, was I.V. Dzhughashvili, also known by his underground name as Koba Stalin. His first major article on the subject, “Social Democracy and the National Question” (1913), was not just a crafty polemic against the Austrian Marxists, as most scholars have proposed. Written for the party academic journal, *Enlightenment* (*Prosveshchenie*), it was also a well-read piece on the subject of nations and nationalism. One of the last major publications before his death, “Marxism and the Problems of Linguistics” (1950), recapitulated the themes. Originally published in *Pravda* in serial parts, it was a polemic to be sure, but framed within the rather dry analysis of linguistics. In between came a host of speeches, articles, pamphlets and discussions on language and national issues. Some were more academic than others. All were political. All confronted, to one degree or another, language as a constituent “form” of the nation. Or, as Karl Marx intimated in the quote above, language as a privileged field within which we humans move and act and think. We can no more escape language than we can history. We can know them and master them, but only by learning and making them anew. They are our inheritance, they are our legacy, and all the spaces in between.

This concept of “form” remains something of a mystery. Stalin and his contemporaries used it with a frequency and self-evidence that belies its deeper meanings. More recently, scholars have recognized the Soviet Union as comprising a state of “ontological nationalities” (Slezkine 1994, p. 414), centered upon the “forms of nationhood” (Martin 2001, p. 5), exploring how “each of the Soviet socialist nations had taken form” (Hirsch 2005, p. 313). We need to parse these meanings of ontological “form” with more care. One possible key to unlocking its mysteries, its Stalinist senses, is Greek philosophy, namely the Platonic theories of Forms and the neo-Platonic dialectics that followed from them. Stalin studied these categories in the curriculum of his Tbilisi seminary, reading Plato in the original Greek. He returned to them in his essay on Linguistics of 1950: both as style, in the shape of a classical Greek dialogue; and as substance, through his exposition of the significance of language “forms.” His language and national forms in history, I propose, mirrored Plato’s Forms in metaphysics, or at least their reproductions in the neo-Platonism that ruled so much of learning in his part of the world at the turn of the century. Both Plato’s and Stalin’s forms were essential and existential, giving uniform structure to visible reality, making aesthetic order out of life’s chaos. Both were multiple and equal, variations of an ideal type common to all humanity. They were both fonts of scientific knowledge and practical action, gauges of historical change both natural and historical.¹ Immutable and absolute Stalin’s national forms were not. The dialectician equivocated here, as perhaps Plato himself did in the end. But the forms certainly were tenacious in time and space. Individual nations might come and go, but some form of the nation would always remain, especially through its language forms. None of these correspondences suggest provenance. They are simply points of reference. Plato’s theories and Greek intellectual traditions were a model, practical metaphors, a classical education upon which Stalin framed some part of his thinking, a key to his intellectual biography along with what he later read of Hegel and Darwin, Marx and Lenin.²

Schooled in the ways of the ancients, Stalin was still a modern man. He came of intellectual age, in the 1913 work especially, at the dramatic intersection of the established age of nationalism and the coming age of socialism. One of his most lasting contributions to Marxist political theory, one with a significant international impact, was to make sense of nationalism in Marxist terms, for all colonial peoples everywhere, from South America to South Asia (Hobsbawm 1991, pp. 2, 136; Hutchinson and Smith 1994, p. 15). In 1913, Stalin was a minor Bolshevik, besieged by the age of nationalism all around him (in Baku and St. Petersburg, Vienna and Cracow), by a flood of literature and by the powerful complex of Austro-Marxist opinion on the nationality question. He wrote the

1913 article in multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan Vienna, at the home of Alexander Troyanovsky, editor of *Enlightenment*, this over the course of several busy weeks, relying on the translating help of his host's extended family and the tutorials of one Nikolai Bukharin (Stalin read German poorly).³ All influences were upon him. By 1934, he was undisputed master of the Communist party and Soviet state, projecting his definitions, through *Marxism and the National and Colonial Problem*, far and wide to the world. The edition, in Russian or English, French or Chinese, always began with his 1913 article on the national question, now renamed for Marxism, rechristened as "theory." All influences now seemed to project from him. This was quite a transformation in just over twenty years. The world, in fact, was beginning to read Marx backwards from Stalin (Bloom 1941, p. 204).

I raise the Stalin card not to personalize or dramatize the cult in history, but to recognize that he was in many respects both most unique and most typical of party leaders. One of the ironies of the historiography is that Stalin remains the last of the great old Bolsheviks to be rehabilitated, not in any moral or political sense of course, but as a historical figure who enjoyed remarkable staying power and popular success. We are only now beginning to read comprehensive and authoritative intellectual biographies about him, some sixty years after his death (van Ree 2002; Davies and Harris 2005; Service 2005). What were the conditions and character traits for his success? Two recent studies reveal the irony, with a hint of shame, that Stalin still has much that is genuine to teach us, particularly about the power of his language theories and national policies (Dorn 2000, pp. 227–228; Avineri 1992, p. 299).

Stalin was such a unique figure early in his career because, as a Bolshevik of Georgian ethnicity with both pro-national "nativizing" and pro-Russian russifying sympathies, he was strategically placed to draft the party's first and lasting manifesto on the question, the 1913 article; to follow V.I. Lenin's leads on the rights of nations to equality and self-determination, on the strategic importance of the anti-colonial and national liberation movement;⁴ to direct the Commissariat of Nationality Affairs between 1917 and 1924; and to secure the grand compromise that was the federal system, the "union" of national republics and regions in 1922. With these and his other posts and experiences, he was uniquely positioned to succeed Lenin as de-facto head of both party and state. Yet Stalin also became, later in his career, quite typical of the vast majority of party members who understood the priority demand and central role of the Russian language in a modernizing economy. After 1935, his regime imposed new all-union Cyrillic scripts for the non-Russians, decreed terminological russification and obligatory teaching of Russian in the schools, yet always in the context of official multi-lingualism, codified in the federal, multi-national constitution of 1936.

There is a remarkable consistency to Stalin's language and national pronouncements through all of these years. The consistency was a function of the very "elasticity," as he called it, of his theories and policies (Stalin 1942 [1934], p. 79). Stalin the dialectician and politician was a master of the political center, the middle way, in good part because of his career path, which wove through multiple points of self-reference. He was always the man in between: as a Georgian between the advanced nation of Russia and the backward peoples of Asia; as a native Georgian speaker struggling with his second language of choice, Russian; as a world statesman between the advanced capitalist west and the backward communist east. As Alfred Reiber has suggested, "the politics of personal identity became the foundations of a Stalinist ideology and a homologue for the Soviet state system" (Reiber 2001, p. 1653). Stalin's appreciation for the elasticity of language communities, for the tenacity of their linguistic forms, helped him to steer this course, to implement his strategies, to join practice with theory.

Language and Nation

The 1913 article on the national question defined nations (*natsiia*) as "communities of culture." These communities were comprised of discrete forms: "language, territory, economic life and psychological makeup." No one element alone was definitive. Only all of them together constituted the community of culture called the nation. It was quite a formidable entity, a fascia of reinforced bonds. Nations were not primordial and immutable, but contingent historical realities, with beginnings and ends: their beginnings being the assimilation of peoples into compact groups of shared culture; the ends being their eventual assimilation into "streams of superior culture." Parts joined into wholes; wholes joined with other wholes. Nations were circles, self-sustaining and mutually intersecting communities; circles which expanded or contracted as they developed along lines of historical change, along a dialectical path from multiplicity to uniformity, Stalin's linear "streams," or what he also called the "higher rungs" of developed nations (Stalin 1942 [1934], p. 56). None of his positions in the essay were terribly original, as leading scholars have noted with some surprise. Here he drew insights from Karl Kautskii and V.I. Lenin; there from the very Austro-Marxists he was charged to attack.⁵ Nations simply were, for this consummate politician, complex realities demanding recognition and cooptation.

Stalin's political task in the article was to confront the debates within the Austrian Socialist Party, as reflected in the protocols of the party's Brünn Congress (1899) and in the writings of two leading theoreticians, Karl Renner and Otto Bauer. Both gave proper due to language and national values through

history. Renner offered a critique of the objective, indeed oppressive bonds between state power, territorial borders, and language conformity within the modern nation; arguing instead for a novel sense of nationhood in the subjective, “inward” dimensions of individual choice, based on linguistic equality and a freer multi-lingualism (Renner 2000 [1899], pp. 21, 26, 43). Bauer, too, negotiated the boundaries between the nation as something inherited and something chosen, especially in territory and language; like Renner he located the nation not in language as such but in its speakers and the “interaction” between them, a field for mutual equality and respect (Bauer 2005 [1907], pp. 112, 224). Renner and Bauer sought ultimately to detach the nation from the state, national culture from state politics. Their call for extraterritorial national-cultural autonomy, centered on the “personality principle,” transformed nations into free associations of free individuals, with an accent on diffusion and decentralization, as well as on protection for national minorities. As Renner proposed, language should be left, like religion, to the devices of small, autonomous parish communities of national culture. Socialism meant overcoming the complex of characteristics and customs that we inherit as members of a traditional ethnic community (*Gemeinschaft*). Socialism meant acquiring the universal values of selfhood and reason that we share as participants in a modern civic society (*Gesellschaft*).⁶

In marked contrast, Stalin and Lenin drew the nation all the more closer to the state, sought to harness its powers for proletarian purposes. Their principle of ethnoterritorial national-cultural autonomy set national cultures within the bounds of prescribed territories and languages, the physical and mental spaces of self-reference and definition. Here was the basis of the “inter-national” relations at the heart of the modern world, the complex of national and multi-national states long existing and still yet to be, within which proletarian parties had developed and would long develop even into the socialist era. Stalin and Lenin had several good reasons to critique and undermine the platforms of extraterritorial national-cultural autonomy. Its “inter-class” psychic ties, joining bourgeoisie and proletariat alike, betrayed the Marxist theoretical heritage, endangered the unity of the working class and its party. Their arguments against Renner and Bauer were also means of undermining the proponents of extraterritorial national-cultural autonomy in the Russian empire, namely the Jewish Bund and Georgian Social Democrats, Bolshevik rivals both. Much of Stalin’s essay targeted the Bund, attacking the Jews of Russia as a broken nation pursuing the false claims of extraterritorial national-cultural autonomy. They lacked the constituent forms of language and territory. They were most vulnerable to “assimilation.” Their very “future” as a national entity was “open to doubt” (Stalin 1942 [1934], pp. 40–42, 46). They also shared, with the Muslims of Russia, the false and dangerous bonds of religious heritage, ritual,

and belief. These were “harmful” characteristics of the nation (as opposed to its “useful attributes”), “patently noxious” and “pernicious institutions” (Stalin 1942 (1934), pp. 46, 47, 59).

Here Stalin was addressing, in one tactical sweep, Renner’s precise analogy between religion and language and the broader issues of Russia’s diaspora peoples. To detach language, like religion, from the territorial and linguistic conformity of the modern nation-state, allowing them freedom and mobility and privilege within civil society, meant to empower the Jews and Muslims of the empire. To empower the Jews meant to concede national-cultural autonomy to the Bund. To empower the Muslims with extraterritorial national-cultural autonomy meant to promote a pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism under the Volga Tatar standard, Russia’s premier dispersed Turkic nationality. Stalin’s advocacy of territorial autonomy, in this regard, besides his debts to Georgian national literature, owed something to his experiences in Baku (between 1905 and 1907), where he came to his first insights about the intricacies of the language and national questions. As Tadeusz Swietochowski has argued, there is a remarkable correspondence between Stalin’s definitions of the nation in 1913 and the positions of the Azerbaijani nationalists among Transcaucasus Muslims and Turks, whose literary and linguistic debates peaked in 1913 around the identification of the “nation” (*millät*) with the “native language.” These positions were later inscribed in the platforms of the Caucasian (Azeri) Muslim bloc and its most charismatic leader, Mammad Amin Räsulzadä, during the local and all-Russian Muslim congresses of 1917. “What is a nation,” he asked, but “the bonds of the language and history ... of customs and tradition.”⁷ The Azeris wanted a national territory within which their native tongue and tradition might flourish; this against the predominantly Volga Tatar platform for representative national-cultural autonomy, meaning a cultural and religious pan-Turkism uniting the disparate Turkic speakers under one “Volga” standard (Rorlich 1986, pp. 128–129). The correspondence between Stalin’s and Räsulzadä’s views, between Bolshevik internationalism and Azerbaijani nationalism, were the first threads of a historical knot that tied emerging nations to territorial homelands in the future Soviet state, that targeted Tatar-sponsored pan-Turkism for suppression and defeat.

Stalin’s concerns were not polemical or political alone. They approached a theoretical, even philosophical depth. Extraterritorial national-cultural autonomy presumed nations devoid of form, no nations at all. They were but a “union of individuals,” scattered here and there, torn from the “compact mass” of the true nation, a mere “fiction deprived of territory,” all psychology and no substance. They were “milk and water” nations, hardly visible to the eye or audible to the ear, dumbed down nations. Calling up imagery from his font of Greek mythology, he marked them as dismembered bodies, annihilated nations, torn

and sheared to fit into the grotesque “Procrustes bed of an integral state” (Stalin 1942 (1934), pp. 29, 31, 33, 36, 64). Stalin’s “inter-national” model instead stressed both a state of rest and a state of motion, what he called processes of “welding” and “dispersion” (Stalin 1942 (1934), pp. 36–37). Nations were meant to come together and to fall apart. Language and territory were both stable and moveable. Workers were inevitably members of fixed nations, speaking a common tongue and living in a common space. But they were also creators of new nations, subject to learning new languages thanks to the processes of movement and “migration” provoked by industrial capitalism. Language was but one of several constituent parts of the nation, to be sure. But for Stalin it was privileged. This view reflected the educated Western-European opinion of the day (Hobsbawm 1991, pp. 98–99). It reflected both Kautskii’s and Lenin’s appreciation for language as the crucial pillar of national community (Nimmi 1991, pp. 91–92; Tucker 1973, p. 153). It was even consonant with an established tradition in Russian philosophy, from A.A. Potebnia to G.G. Shpet, that valued the semiotic over the psychological, that counted language as the system of meaningful signs that forms the basis of all human culture. “People surround themselves within a world of sounds in order to apprehend and cultivate the world of objects,” wrote Shpet, in a quote from Wilhelm Humboldt. “At the very same moment that they elicit language from within themselves, so also they draw themselves back into it. In a sense, each language fills its own people [*narod*] within a kind of circle, which they can only depart by entering into another one” (Shpet 1927, pp. 16–17, 12–13).

Nation and State

Stalin’s political formulas after the revolution, steeled in the heat of the civil wars and party debates, perfectly illustrate his skills with the tension, the “elasticity” between national rhetoric and Marxist ideology. We find printed and spoken affirmations of Leninist principles for national self-determination, anti-colonial struggle, and national liberation. We find such strategic, elastic constructs as the threats of “local/bourgeois nationalism” and “Great Power/Russian chauvinism” (1921); or the historical dialectic moving from capitalist and socialist nations to true communist proletarian internationalism. We find Stalin maneuvering between these tracks, relaying their negative or positive charges, in his promotion of territorial autonomy within the RSFSR and his campaign against Georgian nationalism (Smith 1999). His most ingenious formula, one he repeated time and again, defined Soviet nations as “socialist in content, national in form.”⁸ We scholars tend (as perhaps most rank and file party members did) to privilege “content” since it was socialist. Content meant economic development and psychological makeup, taking shape “in class composition and spiritual complexion and in social and political interests and aspirations,”

so Stalin confirmed in 1929.⁹ Form meant territory, of course. Many of Stalin's writings from the first years of the revolution find him weighing and measuring the emerging RSFSR and USSR states: sizing up the spaces between "center" and "periphery;" counting Russians and "non-Russians" east and west; mapping the vast complex of similarities and differences between Russia's ethnic groups. His own favored plan for "autonomization" became, with some modifications, the very national hierarchy of union republics, autonomous republics, autonomous regions, and national territories that constituted Soviet state federalism (Hirsch 2005, pp. 42–45; Kaiser 1995, p. 105). Out of the chaos of civil war, true to his Platonic worldview, Stalin salvaged some semblance of uniformity and plurality, of the natural and national orders, some legitimacy and hierarchy for the young Soviet state.

Form meant, first and foremost, language, a constant in Stalin's writings on the national question. It was central among the "varied forms" of national experience, of the real and lived "signs" (*priznaki*), "traits" (*cherty*), and "particularities" (*osobennosti*) of national life, something people always "loved and understood."¹⁰ Time and again, national form meant national-language alphabets, primers, grammars, publications, and schools – what Stalin consistently called the inviolable right to the "mother tongue" (Reiber 2001, p. 1667). This appreciation for the native language was not the result of some high-minded altruism. It was a function of the hard-headed, practical politics (*politika*) of the Bolshevik party, which in turn demanded a rational policy (*politika*) of language reforms to elevate the "non-Russian" languages and cultures. As Commissar of Nationality Affairs, Stalin was one of the first patrons of these reform initiatives between 1917 and 1924, a crucial period when the political line, embodied in the platforms for nativization (*korenizatsiia*) of the party and state apparatuses, set the contours of policymaking. Stalin's political overtures gave sanction and purpose to the major language reforms of the era, including the first educational imperatives to teach the native and Russian languages according to the tenets of pedagogical bilingualism; and the first state initiatives to codify and standardize languages, directed by some of Russia's premier structural linguists, like E.D. Polivanov and N.F. Iakovlev.¹¹

Latinization of alphabets, of all the initial language reforms, best embodied the duality between language "politics" and "policy," the valency of *politika*.¹² Stalin was its most significant patron, promoting Latinization of the Arabic and eastern alphabets – first in the Central Committee in 1922, later through the Baku Turkological Congress of 1926. His most loyal allies – Anastas Mikoian in the North Caucasus, Sergei Kirov in Azerbaijan, and Lazar Kaganovich in Turkestan – implemented the campaign, part political attack on the clerical Muslim establishment and tradition, part policy reform to help nativize local languages based on more rational, phonetic scripts. Latinization was also

especially effective in tightening that historical knot, reaching back to 1913, between Bolshevik internationalism and Turkic separatism. Based upon the Azerbaijani model of localism and territorial autonomy, Latinization proved most effective in denying the Volga Tatar movement for a reform of the Arabic script, championed by the linguist, Galimjan Ibragimov, awkwardly aligned with Mirsaid Sultan Galiev, party rebel and pan-Turkist. Stalin and his circle deployed the Azerbaijani model, essentially a form of divide and rule, against the Volga Tatar vision of extraterritorial national-cultural autonomy. The Bolsheviks did not allow Pan-Turkism to compete with pan-Russianism. Only the Russian language enjoyed the privilege of being everything, of encompassing all (*use*), of defining that which was all-Russian and all-Union.

Stalin's posts and policies lent him a certain authority and expertise with language. It was the one "form" he knew and pretended to know well, both in space and through time. His speeches and off-hand comments often found him comparing Belorussian to Russian, Abkhazian and Adjar to Georgian, or Tatar to Bashkir. His writings were consistently drawn to the ends of language time, to a Marxian "eschatology" of language development (See Sandomirskaja 2006, p. 283). He promoted the consensus ideological line of the mid-to-late 1920s, that languages were developing from multiplicity to uniformity, from differentiation to assimilation. To this extent, his views aligned well enough, for the time being, with Nikolai Bukharin's popular and influential *Historical Materialism* (1921), an exposition on the ever developing and perfecting forms of human life, including language, which was ultimately dependant on the economic base, moving from the many to the one (Bukharin 1925 [1921], pp. 103, 203–208, 229, 311). Stalin's definitions matched well, too, with N.Ia. Marr's "new theory of language," which postulated the class nature of language, following developments in the economic base, locked into the trajectory of assimilation, toward the ultimate end of a single world language (Stelletskaa 1935; Slezkine 1996, p. 843; Alpatov 1991). Yet Stalin admitted "little faith" in its immediate implications. Or as he wrote in both his private and his public communications between 1925 and 1934, later reaffirmed in his 1950 essay: the "period of the victory of socialism in one country" would mostly see multiplicity and differentiation in language development. Only the "period of the victory of socialism on a world scale" would see "the merging of nations and the formation of one common language."¹³ He respected and valued, most of all, the present moment, his moment of "socialism in one country," of "socialism in content, national in form." He recognized, most of all, the "colossal power of stability possessed by nations," the "extraordinary stability and tremendous power of resistance" in their languages against any coercive change. In a most revealing phrase, Stalin demanded that Soviet socialist nations enjoy the right of "free development." This meant, so he emphasized in a flourish of repetition (a mark

of his rhetorical and didactic style), a fusion of the social and the national always “in the native languages in the native languages ... in the native languages in the native languages in their native, national languages.”¹⁴

A puzzle remains. What did “free development” ultimately mean? What would happen to national forms as they became infused with more and more socialist content? Would they remain nations, or would class content overwhelm them? A “reigning orthodoxy” in the scholarship, as Ronald G. Suny has termed it, holds that Stalin’s nations counted most, that the USSR actually even invented new nations, that Soviet language and nationality policies created the foundations of a lasting “national awareness” among the non-Russian peoples, the basis for their national “identities” and “consciousness” (Suny 2001, p. 871). This literature weighs and values identity politics, the national psychology, above all: how people came to imagine and think of themselves as Ukrainians or Uzbeks. Not merely for the present, but for the past and future too, they became “primordial” nations: fixed and immovable, eternal and essential.¹⁵ The orthodoxy reigns for good reason. Its scholars employ rare analytical and interpretive approaches, with a depth of archival sources and a range of cross-cultural and comparative perspectives. They highlight the great irony and paradox of the Soviet state. Originally devoted to class-based internationalism and world unity, it instead became the “odd empire” (Suny 1993), the “affirmative action empire” (Martin 2001), the “empire of nations” (Hirsch 2005), locked into its state architecture of calcifying nations. National form, so the argument holds, became filled with its own national content.¹⁶ There is a fault line in this kind of scholarship, though. It is locked into the psychology of national “identity,” something more mystical than real; or into the very paradox it addresses, the timeline of rise and fall, focused on the present tense alone, or more precisely – past imperfect.

We may need a freer grammar of Soviet history, a fuller appreciation of tenses. Because Stalin and his comrades always thought and wrote in terms of the future perfect tense, too – often on their minds, the dreamers. The USSR as a state of nations was to become, for them, a “nation” of nations, a new “community of culture” according to Stalin’s 1913 definition, in time a new nation altogether.¹⁷ Soviet policymakers, including Stalin, never seem to have uttered the phrase, “Soviet nation,” in reference to the USSR as a whole. It would have been a violation of the norms of Soviet nationality policy, too much a fixation on the finality of the historical dialectic rather than its all important process. The closest they came was “Soviet people” (*Sovetskii narod*). Both phrases, at any rate, had theoretical legitimacy in Marx, who wrote in a most dramatic way, at the center of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), about the proletarian class becoming “a vast association of the whole nation.”¹⁸ This image became a coin of the socialist realm, both west and east. For Edward Bellamy, it was the great “umbrella,”

nothing more than the progressive new architecture for the socialist “nation.” Or, as socialist philosopher, Charles Vail, proposed, for socialism to be fulfilled, “Trusts must combine into one great trust, the Nation.”¹⁹ Bukharin toyed with the imagery of Marx’s class-based “nation,” too. Class became nation, in his words, by its real or potential capacity to rise to hegemony over the superstructure, to define and rule over the varieties of its ideological forms. This concept of Soviet *narod* also had express validation in G.G. Shpet’s classic work, *Introduction to Ethnic Psychology*. Russia’s premier philosopher of aesthetic and logical “forms,” and always an astute commentator and elaborator upon Marx, Shpet looked to the future and theorized that, if traditional nations gave way to a new proletarian class, that very class, “transfusing between this nation and that,” would basically have “created new, never before seen collectives,” and history would have “given birth to new nations” (*narodilis’ novye narody*).²⁰ The dialectic between content and form would not give way to the end of history and humanity, to no nations at all, but to a whole new form, altogether new nations.²¹

These approaches to a “Soviet nation” correspond well enough to the Marxist phenomenology of change, the logic of dialectical materialism, based ultimately upon Greek philosophy and so concisely expressed in the infamous *Short Course* of 1938 (Central Committee 1939, pp. 107, 112), one of the foundational texts of Stalinist dialectical materialism. Most historical forms became “fetters” over time, according to its strict Marxian logic, as new relations of production created and confronted new material forces of production. Bourgeois nationalism was just such a fettered ideological form, obstacle to positive historical change. Yet human beings were the subjects as well as the objects of revolutionary change. The revolution was, at its essence, all about the creation of new forms. In the case of the USSR, revolutionaries had overturned the fetters of bourgeois nationalism into the healthy forms of socialist nations. They had intervened into history’s complex field of “transformations.” After all, “the spontaneous process of development yields place to the conscious actions of men, peaceful development to violent upheaval, evolution to revolution” (Central Committee 1939, pp. 122, 130–131). Socialist nations were a function, in other words, of the material inheritances of natural and human history, of territory and ontology; and of the dialectical laws that informed them, now mastered by living people in the real world. “Matter is eternal and indestructible,” testified one of the treatises on dialectical materialism from that banner year, 1938; “but it endlessly changes its forms, moves from one level of development to another.” True materialism and scientific knowledge were “blood brothers” (Gurev 1938, p. 8). They were the keys to explaining the “laws of development of society;” to transforming Socialism itself a transformative “science” (Central Committee 1939, pp. 114–115). Already prefigured here were Stalin’s more strident claims to come, especially in the 1950 essay on Linguistics, about the practicality and universality

of “objective scientific laws.” What had been merely local, socialism in one country, was about to become more boldly global, a socialism for the world.

State and Language

Stalin’s essay on Linguistics has, as a rule, been either shunned or ignored. It has always been so much easier for us to focus on the scandals surrounding T.D. Lysenko’s eccentric theories on the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Five major books have been written on that controversy, the perfect case study of a sham Soviet “science.” No books have been written on Stalin’s Linguistics essay at all. True enough, intellectuals and philosophers across a wide political spectrum have always been willing to recognize and criticize its insights.²² There are also several new works that expertly place the 1950 essay in the context of the elite scientific and ideological debates in Moscow in the post-war years: as an example of the “recantations and rituals” of “Stalinist science” (Krementsov 1997, p. 287); of the “games of Stalinist Democracy” (Kojevnikov 2000); and of the “politics of knowledge” (Pollack 2006). But we have achieved all of this at the expense of language politics and theories, which reveal to us a set of different facts and insights.

Stalin’s essay was decisively political, an exercise in ideological control. By 1949, inspired by the claims and debates of the Lysenko camp, the followers of N.Ia. Marr’s theories waged a campaign of their own to revive his teachings in higher and secondary education. Yet their campaign was destined to fail. The Marrists were a significant ideological force in Linguistic science and language reform through the 1930s. Their platforms matched close enough with the trajectory of party-state policies: against Latinization of alphabets; for the central role of the Russian language in the Soviet state; with the Leninist and Stalinist line on the long developmental path of languages (and nations) from multiplicity to uniformity (Smith 1998, pp. 81–102; Crisp 1990, p. 31). But they had also suffered a loss of status by 1938 (Slezkine 1996, p. 853). Although Marr’s name still carried weight in Linguistics, in the public realm (biographies of Stalin or leading newspapers and magazines) his name rarely if ever appeared along with the great coryphaeus’ of Soviet science: Mendeleev, Timiriachev, Pavlov, Tsiolkovskii, Michurin. Marr was, apparently, not Russian enough. Stalin’s essay denied him final entrance into the pantheon, raising his own name instead. (Stalin was no more Russian than Marr, of course; but he was the model Soviet man.)

By 1948, in the wake of the Russian victory in World War II, and the exaltation of the Russian nation and language as never before, Marrist linguistics also proved itself unequal to the task. Its dependence on word origins and semantics were no match for the new Soviet project in advanced russification,

for the new demands to teach Russian grammar and syntax. Stalin's essay was, in this sense, most practical. One of his government's reasons for opening the debate, centered upon the essay, was to finally reform the teaching of Russian in all of the USSR's schools. Earlier decisions and decrees had failed. Both Russian and non-Russian students were failing Russian-language courses at alarming rates. The essay was a signal to stop the discord, the misspellings and grammatical mistakes and mispronunciations that all amounted to one great broken Russian.²³ If the USSR was an empire by 1950, with Russian as its overarching linguistic standard, it was but an empire of accents. The hundreds of thousands of people who read Stalin's essay, Russians with their own dialects from the provinces and non-Russians with their own native languages from the peripheries, would certainly have received it with their own and with Stalin's accents in mind. These language barriers were divisive. People had to begin to speak with more of one voice.

Stalin's essay on Linguistics was also sufficiently theoretical, really a study in socio-linguistics. It joined the seriously social with the cautiously semiotic, expressing a sophisticated appreciation for language as something both dynamic and stable. It recognized language's "almost constant" propensity to "change." Language was subject to the influences of both base and superstructure; but beholden to neither, independent, a social product of the long *duree*. In this regard, Stalin took indisputable aim at Bukharin's rather "Marrist" definition of language as belonging wholly to the superstructure, dependent upon the economic base, even reflected in this or that "class" language (Bukharin 1925 [1923], pp. 203–208). The accent of Stalin's work was on Linguistics: about "the existing language with its structure," about "the great stability of language and its colossal power of resistance," about how it "sets rules for word changes, not specific words but words in general without any specificity" (Stalin 1950, pp. 71–74). Stalin repeated this term, Linguistics, at least forty times, often in quick succession. We like to think, in the shadow of the Lysenko and Marr controversies, that Stalin compromised Linguistics. Perhaps it compromised him: Linguistics as the "science" of language, a fundamental part of Science more broadly, which like language (and technology) was an independent social force. Science, according to the reigning dialectical materialism, was both a means and an end. The Soviet state counted such interventions within it as Michurinism and Lysenkoism in Biology, Pavlovism in Psychology, and Stalinism in Economics (van Ree 2002, pp. 186, 269–277; Kremensov 1997, p. 289). But Marxism, as dialectical materialism, was also the ultimate science of natural, historical and social change. Marxism is a "science a science a science a science a science," so Stalin concluded the essay. The art of language politics and policy (*politika*) had now given way to the certain science of knowing (*nauka*). Bolshevik ontologies, the circular orders of languages and nations, had begun to merge

with a new Stalinist “epistemology,” (Sandomirskaja 2006, p. 291; Wetter 1958 [1952], pp. 489, 549), a linear concordance of universal laws.

Composed in 1950 at the end of his life, the essay on Linguistics was essentially a meditation upon time. It was a tract for the ages. For the first time, really, Stalin was writing not about languages but “Language,” not about nationalities but the “Nation.” The essay addressed a kind of culmination. Much had changed since 1913. In terms of the Russian or Ukrainian or Uzbek nations, several traits of nationhood had changed completely. Economics and psychology had changed, for sure, as the new realms of socialist content. Territory had changed for some more than for others. But only one trait had remained basically the same: language. This was really the overriding conclusion of the essay. Class-building, at least in terms of language, was a more modest enterprise than Stalin and his loyalists had thought. Terminologies and idioms were beholden to grammar. Socialist content was beholden to national form, what Stalin now called a language’s “specific features,” its grammar and grammatical “structure.” He recognized that languages would not fuse in his lifetime, quite a concession for a man and a party that had made revolution, enacted collectivization and industrialization, engineered the purges, and won a world war. He could lay claim to being an “engineer of human souls,” but not an engineer of language. He could lay claim to shaping nature by the inheritance of acquired characteristics, to staging revolutionary leaps in biology, to transforming Nature through canals and dams and gigantic works projects. But he succumbed to the long evolutionary power of languages, and by implication their nations, to resist change. This was the Saussurian position, if for the moment. The nation was a pure form. The nation was to humanity as grammar was to language. Like grammar, the nation was, as a free universal form, well nigh indestructible.

There is a temptation to define these ideological and philosophical positions as a mark of Stalinist totalitarianism, a closed society of select governing elites, of strict social rankings and ordained tasks, a temptation as worthy of H.G. Wells as of Karl Popper.²⁴ The essay on Linguistics seems to show Stalin at his Platonic worst, beholden to a rigid hierarchy of languages and nations, everything and everyone in their proper place, under the guidance of his own philosophy and kingship. As “author of the most dogmatic and most essentialist ‘definition’ of the nation,” Pierre Bourdieu has inveighed, Stalin was really perpetrating “the regal intention to rule and direct,” the “royal science of frontiers and limits.”²⁵ This may be the judgment of what Ronald Suny has called the “orthodox,” “primordialist” school, as well: that the USSR became an empire of fixed, essential parts, a web of intractable identities. These are all worthy and valuable points of view. But changing our perspective, our conceptual grounds, through the lens of language, seems to change the material too, brings the model of a

dialectical “nation of nations” into closer and clearer view. This model helps us to see how the Soviet state, as a “nation” coming to be, was not finally static and stagnant, but always moveable and changeable. The means and ends of language change, as discussed in Stalin’s theories, did not speak of nations amalgamating through sudden tectonic shifts or revolutionary leaps, wholes joining with other wholes. The merging of nations was to happen, rather, more gradually and intermittently, as different parts of different wholes came together to form altogether new wholes, altogether new nations. As Gustav Wetter has written, the “final victory of communism,” thanks to this tenacity of language and national forms, was even “thereby postponed to the Greek calends” (Wetter 1958 [1952], p. 224).

Stalin’s model in his 1913 article was of simple physical spaces and linguistic parts, urban islands of economic development, in places like Baku, where people became more Russian (and from hindsight more Soviet). By 1950, the model was more complex, one of great territorial “zones,” as he called them, a Soviet Union of many languages (a horizontal multilingualism) dissected by recognized national languages and the common standard of Russian (a vertical bilingualism). This was a model after Marx’s own insights and Stalin’s own life experiences, one in which a vast country of language learners always remembered the native language, but “assimilated the spirit of the new language” (Russian) only by forgetting “in it” (if only intermittently) their “ancestral tongue,” just as Stalin did. Language was a physical space, too, a circle that individuals and peoples inhabited. Those circles shifted and intersected, just as their speakers did. But people always inhabited only one circle at a time. The USSR was perhaps becoming, oddly enough, something like Renner’s and Bauer’s model of national-cultural autonomy: a country of diverse languages and nations, governed by birth and choice, multi-national and multi-cultural. Bauer was wrong for the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires both, for past and present. But he was right for the future. Because the USSR was simply fulfilling Bauer’s own call for truly free socialist nations, for the “realization of the national community of culture in its pure form” (Bauer 2000, p. 411). The USSR was becoming a modern civil society (*Gesellschaft*) all its own. This was none other than Marx’s utopian model of the “nation” in *The Communist Manifesto*: “an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” At least by design, Stalin’s USSR was just such a sum of many parts, freely developing across its national spaces. The global imperatives of the Cold War era demanded nothing less, with Soviet influence having conquered half of Europe and spreading into all of Asia. Places like China and Indonesia, India and Pakistan, were the very sites where Stalin’s works on the national question were now printed in mass editions, the very places where the communist question still remained a national question.

Conclusion

However repugnant the man and his regime, Stalin's notions about language and nation addressed a set of compelling truths, truths to which he vainly aligned his own political persona, as the great "internal form" of Soviet society (Sandmirskaia 2006, pp. 265–277). Nations are really nothing if not existential, if not lived, lived through language: spoken, written, printed, and read through language. It is our most reliable gauge of self-reference and definition, for ourselves and for others. True, for us "post-moderns" today, language is as much a knot of derivations and contradictions and ambiguities as nation (or race or class or gender, for that matter). These terms are all conceptual grounds for the codification and for the contestation of meanings, past and present. But there is an honesty about language that rivals other categories and objects of analysis. Because we always have language first. We can hide within it. We can equivocate and prevaricate to members of our own speech communities. But we cannot hide behind it. We cannot pretend to be members of a different speech community unless we already in some way are, unless we already "can produce freely in it" and "move in it without remembering the old." Bowing to his early schooling in Platonic theory, bound to the dictates of Marxist theory, Stalin reminded his readers then, reminds us even now, that language and nation are the circles within which we will always move, the anthropological conditions of our lives. He transformed the tenacity of forms into the permanence of form. Forms will come and go. Form never will.

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