

The resurgence of national identities in the Soviet Union

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URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_resurgence_of_national_identities_in_the_soviet_union-en-437e620c-bcab-4fa5-a88c-4ffc3e1299b7.html

Last updated: 08/07/2016



The resurgence of national identities in the Soviet Union

The fall of the Communist regimes in the satellite states and their emancipation from the USSR led to a revival of individual national identities within the Soviet Union. Although the Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics recognised the 15 Republics of various nationalities and granted them a certain degree of autonomy, heavy centralisation was maintained by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), by economic planning and by the involvement of Russians in local authorities. Gorbachev's reforms encouraged the resurgence of national identities and the Republics' desire for independence. Gorbachev himself accepted the principle of increased autonomy for the Republics but intended to uphold the Union.

The desire for independence was first expressed by the Baltic States, which, having formerly constituted part of the Tsarist Empire, had enjoyed independence between 1920 and 1940 before becoming incorporated into the USSR under the German-Soviet Pact of 23 August 1939 (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact). From 1987 onwards, certain factions had been calling for independence and had practised passive resistance. Lithuania proclaimed its independence on 11 March 1990, an initiative deemed unlawful by Gorbachev, who sent in Soviet troops. On 30 April, Estonia also declared its independence but left the way open for negotiations with Moscow, as the USSR Parliament had adopted a law on 3 April on arrangements for the secession of a Republic. Latvia, in turn, proclaimed its independence on 4 May, accepting a transitional period. On 12 May, the first 'Baltic Summit' took place in Tallinn, Estonia.

The movement for independence grew stronger with the election of Boris Yeltsin as President of the Russian Parliament on 25 May 1990. It was Yeltsin who ensured that the principle of the primacy of the Russian Republic's law over that of the USSR was adopted. On 27 July, Yeltsin entered into negotiations with the three Baltic Presidents. It was at this point that most of the Republics proclaimed their sovereignty: Georgia and Uzbekistan (26 June), Ukraine (16 July), Belarus (27 July), Armenia and Turkmenistan (23 August), Tajikistan (24 August), and Kazakhstan (26 October).

Gorbachev tried to preserve the Union. On 24 November, he published a draft treaty to replace the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics with the Union of Sovereign Soviet Republics. He reaffirmed the leading role played by the Communist Party, of which he was General Secretary, and established a presidential regime, thereby concentrating power in his own hands. He sent troops into the Baltic countries and into Georgia, but without success; in February–March 1991, the Balts voted by referendum in favour of independence, and the Georgians — who had still not forgotten their previous independence in 1918–1921 — voted likewise on 9 April. Gorbachev put forward the draft for a new Union treaty, approved on 17 March 1991 by a referendum passed in 9 Republics out of 15 (i.e. in every country except the three Baltic States, Georgia, Armenia and Moldavia). On 17 June, he signed an agreement with the leaders of these Republics regarding a draft treaty.

Gorbachev, who had received the Nobel Peace Prize on 5 June, launched an appeal for a massive aid package from the West in order to ensure the success of perestroika. President George Bush granted him guaranteed credit for the purchase of American agricultural products. However, despite this aid, the implosion of the USSR seemed inevitable, given the aspirations for independence in the Republics.