

Soviet Affirmative Action: The Harvard Interview Project of 1950-51

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Stalin was in many respects the architect of the world's first and most ambitious and far-reaching affirmative action programs. We need to remind ourselves that the Soviet Union was not a nation-state, not a federation, nor indeed an empire (despite the title). Instead, its 'imagined community' was the friendship of the peoples, or 'international nationalism'. (China too is a new form of the state, developing further the experience of the Soviet Union.).

Let me return to the question of affirmative action, for not a few will be a little sceptical: sure, the Soviet government may have made many statements concerning affirmative action, and Stalin may have made many speeches to that effect and even shaped the 1936 constitution, but what about actual experiences? What happened on the ground? An extraordinary amount.

One small example comes from the Harvard Interview Project of 1950-51, which interviewed displaced persons - 250 Ukrainians, Belorussians and Russians - after the Second World War, from Smolensk and Leningrad.

The interviewers did not ask direct questions concerning ethnic conflict. Instead, they asked respondents to list the 'distinguishing characteristics' of Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, Georgians, Armenians, Kalmyks and Tatars. To the astonishment of the interviewers, many of the respondents replied that there were no ethnic differences whatsoever. The interviewers pressed their case, but the respondents (as Martin points out) determined that there were two very different issues at stake. First, did the Soviet government treat nationalities differently, even persecuting them as the Nazis did? The responses: 'Politically and in living standards, no. In national customs, yes'; 'Yes, the Jews have the first place in the Soviet Union'. Second, the respondents inferred an interest by the interviewers in popular prejudice in the Soviet Union. In response: 'Yes, of course there are [national differences]. But the nationalities are not enemies because of that'; 'But that does not mean there are necessarily antagonistic feelings between us'.

Even more, many of the respondents connected the absence of popular prejudice and conflict to state policy. In response to the question concerning 'distinguishing characteristics', a dozen respondents asserted that the absence of open national prejudice was due to the very severe punishments for racial-hate speech. The responses are worth noting:

No, that is impossible. Everyone must love everyone in the Soviet Union ... It is against the law to have national animosities.

There is no chauvinism. You can get ten years for it.

In the army, a soldier got seven years for calling a Jew 'Zhid.'

All are alike. You cannot tell somebody that he is a Ukrainian and brag that you are a Russian or you would be arrested.

It is strictly forbidden by law to offend any member of any nationality, regardless of whether he is a Russian, Ukrainian, White Russian, or anything else.

If you cussed out a member of a minority group, there was serious trouble.

If you call a Jew a 'zhid', he can go to the police and you will get a prison sentence.

A primary school teacher told a personal story of how she had used a Russian proverb, 'An untimely guest is worse than a Tatar', and almost lost her job.

As one commentator observes, 'When one considers that the interviewers neither asked about national prejudice nor about state policy, these spontaneous responses are impressive testimony to the success of the Soviet campaigns against great power chauvinism and in favor of internationalism and friendship among the Soviet peoples'.

What about the 1936 'Stalin' constitution's guarantee of national equality for all peoples? How did respondents see it? They initially opined that it was a complete fraud and not worth the paper on which it was written, but then pointed out, 'correct', this guarantee is observed; 'in this case there is no conflict between the text of the constitution and reality'; 'all nations have the same rights

Bear in mind that these positions were also voiced in the context of immediate memories of Nazi racial theory and practice. And that they arose from the same period as the extensive purges of the 1930s - part of my investigation of the practical contributions to a materialist doctrine of evil, if not a thorough revision of Marxist theories of human nature.