

Russia's Periphery

Student Authored Website

Korenizatsiia (Indigenization)

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On acquiring the lands of Central Asia, the Soviet Union deployed the strategy of assimilation via indigenization [*korenizatsiia*]. This process emphasized the importance of native ethnic groups' involvement in Sovietized institutions, namely governmental and educational systems. The Soviets saw indigenization as a way to “fight backwardness” by placing the power of restructuring and socializing these new Soviet nations into the hands of the natives, or more specifically, the native elites. Elites were required to enlist as Communist party officials and were expected to promote and uphold the new way of life, especially at newly recognized national borders. Part of the Soviet plan was to acknowledge ethnic territories that had remained previously undefined by many Central Asian cultures (Northrop, 48). The Soviets believed that by creating and encouraging an environment which allowed for citizens to communicate with their Soviet governments through accepted elites in native tongues, they were empowering the natives as well as supporting both national self-determination and socialism. This was an especially important tactic of implementing socialism and establishing Soviet organs in such a volatile region, where members of society still clung on to memories of tsarist-colonial oppression (Edgar, 71).



The first decree of indigenization in the Soviet Union was passed in 1923, after the Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union concluded that non-Russian natives should maintain the central roles in national republics. The policy outlined the need for a majority constituency of non-Russian natives in all government institutions, the use of a Republic's specified native language in all government documentation and policies, and the use of native languages in all other state-affiliated institutions (Edgar, 73). This activity was consistent with Lenin's “nationalist in form, socialist in content” policy, whereby the ultimate goal of



indigenization was to introduce an [intelligentsia](#) “with a new Soviet elite forged in socialist educational institutions” (Edgar, 75). While such policies were intended to promote the role of non-Russian natives in socializing their nations, the responsibility placed on the people of the Central Asian republics was a direct source of tension between the natives and the Soviets.

The implementation of indigenization implied that these peripheral republics had already established a number of governmental and cultural institutions. Museums, institutes of higher learning, and organizations involved in printed media, however, were often either poorly established or completely absent from these republics, leaving the government with the task of both creating these institutions

and filling them with capable and educated non-Russian employees (Edgar, 74). The Soviets quickly recognized that most of these Central Asian societies were still heavily agrarian and in many cases nomadic, leading them to revise their policies and assume a more direct role in regulating the socialization of the new republics.

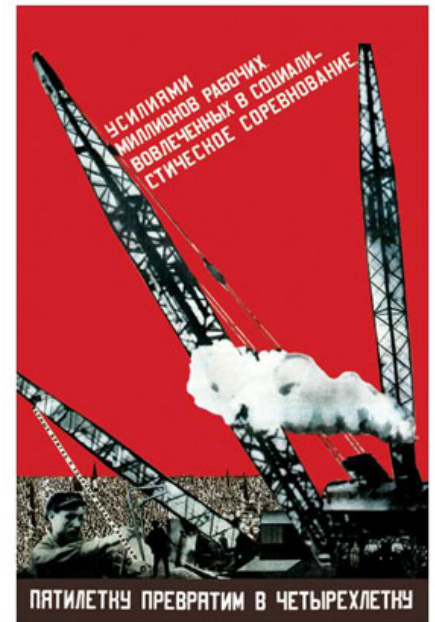
In the [Turkmen Republic](#), a program known as praktikantstvo was introduced to help assimilate the natives. The program allowed for a participant to receive a salary while receiving training for a specific job. This strategy, however, was grossly ineffective, as most Turkmen natives were illiterate, poorly qualified, and generally unfit for any type of government office service. One attempted remedy was to create special courses for unqualified individuals before placing them in jobs; unfortunately, the high rate of illiteracy posed a tremendous problem in finding suitable candidates (Edgar, 77). The initial indigenization policies resulted in a multitude of superficial institutions incapable of self-support, as well as a propaganda-fed population that was becoming increasingly frustrated with the lack of progress (Edgar 72). In an attempt to identify a proletariat in the [Uzbek Republic](#), the Soviets attempted to rally the elites around women's [veiling practices](#) as symbols of oppression. By identifying the veil as a sign of backwardness, the Soviets hoped to encourage progress through laws condemning it; the result, however, was staunch resistance against the Soviet regime in the name of Uzbek culture (Northrop, 23-27).

As was common in many other nations, the more capable members of society in the Turkmen republic were the Russians. As such, they often held staunch anti-indigenization views, as such policies encouraged them to be passed over for unqualified Turkmen. Employees were not the only ones who felt abused; many employers suffered financial losses due to incompetent workers under these policies, and eventually many decided to ignore indigenization policies and hired Russians despite the law. The railroad company workforce in Turkmenistan, for example, consisted of less than four percent ethnic Turkmen in 1925 (Edgar, 79). For their part, the Turkmen natives felt that the Russians were coming to Turkmenistan because they could not find work anywhere else. The Turkmen argued that the point of indigenization was to support the local growth of the native population, and that instead of working with the indigenous population and learning their language, employers simply hired qualified Russians. The end-result was a "dual sense of victimization," playing up to quickly rising ethnic tensions (Edgar, 79-80). In the [Kazakh republic](#), Russians were given a certificate showing that they had been fired due to policies set forth by korenizatsiia. In the Uzbek republic, the OGPU received letters sent to family members in Russia, declaring strong resentment towards both Uzbeks and the korenizatsiia policies (Martin, 137).

As a direct result of the difficulties assimilating indigenous peoples, the Central Asian Bureau made major changes to indigenization policies in 1927. The policy shifted emphasis from working with and hiring ethnic natives to hiring individuals who could speak the national language. Ethnic Russians and Europeans now had a competitive edge over the indigenous natives, providing they had adequate linguistic ability. This change shifted the aim of the entire indigenization process from creating a self-sustaining indigenous Soviet government to simply making the government a practical and well-functioning entity (Edgar, 85). Instead of ameliorating ethnic tensions, however, this policy change only heightened them. In Turkmenistan, few non-natives were willing to learn the native language, and few government agencies adhered to the new policies. The Turkmen, like many other Central Asian groups, viewed language as a symbol of national pride, and the outsiders' ignorance of it only added to the feeling that the Turkmen were second-class citizens in their own republic (Edgar, 85).

Stalin's Five-Year Plan of 1928 called for a strengthening of indigenization by removing the focus on ethno-national distinctions and simply advocating "non-Russian nationhood." The plan included decrees designed to

accelerate the rate of socialization by countering policies made by the Central Asian Bureau the year before. Many opponents of indigenization fought the changes. They argued that the plans set forth to hire more illiterate and unqualified natives would only decrease economic productivity. A Russian official in Turkmenistan, Mikhailov, astutely pointed out that hiring only indigenous members of society into Soviet organs not only slowed the economy, but also gave more attention to the national question than to class issues. Mikhailov also claimed that indigenization was pointless in the face of economic conflict (Edgar, 88-89). Nevertheless, ethnic natives were hired into government positions. These people were often “former peasants who were living in the city for the first time. They needed help not only with work, but also with finding housing and adjusting to city life” (Edgar, 90). The new plan ultimately was as detrimental as its opponents had expected, and unsuccessful in nearly every aspect.



Aside from the economic and political catastrophe that resulted from poorly regulated indigenization policies, there was often a strong cultural backlash as well. Many Turkmen, who had attended Soviet schools spoke Russian, and worked for the Soviet institutions, were chastised by their fellow natives. There was an impending “threat of russification” that was associated with the Turkmen elite. Historian Adrienne Edgar argues that this may have been the result of the insecurity of the Turkmen nation regarding their newly established national identity. After all, many rural farming groups and nomads only identified with society on the local level and had either no concept or no concern of national identity. As a result, a stigma surrounded both the Russians and the russified Turkmen population, widening the rift between the native population and the Soviet regime (Edgar, 93-94).

As the failure of indigenization became more obvious to the Central Asian republics, resentment of the Soviet regime became widespread. In 1934 Stalin declared that local nationalism was an even more dangerous threat than “Russian chauvinism,” against which the policies of indigenization were initially meant to combat. Throughout the Soviet Union, efforts to indigenize non-Russian populations were abandoned and replaced with policies favoring Russian Soviet practices. In 1938, the Russian language replaced all other languages taught in schools around the Union, and the focus eventually shifted from Republic welfare to Union welfare (Edgar, 97-99).

Despite the fact that the policies set forth under the Soviet Union’s korenizatsiia were regarded ultimately as a failure, the effectiveness of the overall strategy deserves acknowledgement. Under indigenization efforts, many Central Asian nations, such as Turkmenistan, showed increases in literacy, the creation of a new technology-based workforce, and in many cases cultural institutions in nations where previously none had existed (Edgar, 98). Unfortunately, the nations never reached the point of true political stability consistent with the idealized autonomous, nationally self-determined, socialized state, and in most cases the imposition of these Soviet policies only widened the gap between the center and the periphery.

Works cited

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