Gorbachev

The national question was arguably treated as being insignificant by Gorbachev.

Gorbachev’s ‘revolution from above’ fuelled a large scale of ethnic unrest never before seen in Soviet history as nationalities within the world’s largest multiethnic society seized the opportunities opened up by glasnost and demanded greater self-determination. It wasn’t just the traditionally assertive nationalities like the Latvians, Estonians and Georgians, but also those considered most loyal such as Armenians, Moldovans, and Belarusians who were drawn into the arena of ethnic politics. Large scale violence, demonstrations, strikes, protests, and the center’s inability to convince the nationalities of the validity of its policies posed the biggest threat to the very existence of the Soviet Union.

- In the first year as General Secretary Gorbachev merely re-stated Brezhnev’s policies
- 27th Party Congress in 1986 – Gorbachev’s clearest statement on the national question, there was little departure from the Brezhnevite line: No reference made to sliyanie of nations while much was made of a united Soviet people, Sovetskii narod, ‘cemented by the same economic interests, ideology and political goals’ – however he acknowledged that there are problems with the national question – he acknowledged problems of ethnic relations but never talked about solving them, just had a few references to sblizhenie and that’s it
- Gorbachev had a programme for economic modernisation and socio-economic accelerate, however, none of these were linked to the nationalities question – it wasn’t until nationalist unrest began to rise that the Gorbachev regime began to take action

Things went tits up when:
- Mid-December 1986 Kazakh riots in Alma Ata were the first major blow – triggered by the replacement of Kazakh First Secretary with a Russian (broke of the universal practice of appointing natives to such posts) – an outsider was brought in to reassert control over a republic economically crippled by elites – it made sense, however, for Kazakhs (numerically outnumbered and feeling socially vulnerable and economically deprived) it showed that the new regime was insensitive to national sensibilities. Ethnic unrest never before seen in the Soviet Union began to rise and the illusion of a society having secured cultural coexistence had been shattered
- 1987: Crimean Tatars, Baltic peoples, and Ukrainians – in February 1988 ethnic unrest shifted towards Transcaucasia – ethnically Armenian-dominated area of Nagorno-Karabakh administered as part of Azerbaijan passed a resolution calling for its territory to be transferred over to Armenia – bloodshed + riots = Kremlin declared the nationalities question was a vital issue on their agenda
- Rather than actually formulating some kind of nationalities policy, Gorbachev’s approach was to respond to each new crisis as it arose – Moscow tended to favour short term plans
- No General Secretary after Lenin successfully implemented a coherent nationalist policy – Gorbachev decided to go back to Lenin’s original intent: reformation of nationalities policy was therefore going to occur within the framework of Lenin’s conception of Soviet federation “a union of republics possessing real sovereignty in all spheres of states life” – July 1989 in his speech Gorbachev reminded the Soviet people perestroika meant “fully implementing in practice the principles on which Lenin based the union of Soviet republics”
- Proposals: Devolve more economic and political autonomy to the republics, including the right to establish relations with foreign states and international organisations and to recognise the right of the autonomous republics, if they so wished, to adopt the language of nationality of the namesake republics the state language, which would be recognised by the union, the federation was to remain centralized though
• Stalin’s social policies oriented towards religion were similar to that of Lenin’s; he sought to completely eliminate religion. Many churches, synagogues, and mosques were either closed or put to other uses. Schools, which initially had been told to ignore religion from the curriculum were told to teach lessons presenting religion as being harmful and backwards. People practicing religion ran at risk of being arrested.

• In terms of economic policy, Stalin completely scrapped the NEP in 1928. It had to be scrapped because it contained the seeds of its own destruction, the NEP allowed for certain capitalist principles to flourish were in direct conflict with communist beliefs. The ‘Great Turn’ between 1928-9 marked a radical change in economic policy with Stalin’s Five Year Plan which called for a command economy, meaning all decisions on the economy were to be made by the government only.

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