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From Affirmative Action to Anti-Colonialism: Stalin and the Prehistory of Post-Colonialism

By Roland Boer

Soviet Russia is a torch which lights the path to liberation from the yoke of the oppressors for all the peoples of the world (Stalin 1920a, 408, 1920b, 395, see also Stalin 1927c, 172, 1927d, 169).¹

Summary.

In accounts of the precursors of postcolonial theory a number of thinkers usually appear, such as Marx, Lenin, perhaps Mao Zedong, but definitely Frantz Fanon and C.L.R. James. Missing from this line-up is Stalin. It is convenient to ignore Stalin, since his name functions as a cipher for radical polarization, oscillating between veneration and demonization. Yet, a sober reassessment of Stalin will find that he is crucial not only for the prehistory of postcolonial theory, but also the theoretical and practical groundwork that postcolonial theory needed to repress in order to enable its own emergence.

The following study has three steps. First, it draws on the insightful work of Christina Pettersson, which shows that postcolonial theory could arise only after the triumphalist 'defeat' of the Soviet Union and indeed the Eastern Bloc after 1989, or what she calls the dissolution of the so-called 'Second World'. Second, it analyses the theory and practice of affirmative action in the Soviet Union, which was explicitly fostered by Stalin. Third, and crucially, it identifies the breakthrough from affirmative action to an anti-colonial position, which provided the justification for Soviet policies in assisting anti-colonial struggles throughout the world. These two features – affirmative action and anti-colonialism – enabled the historical conditions for post-colonialism, as well as the theoretical and practical realities that have been simultaneously repressed and appropriated by postcolonial theory².

Postcolonial Theory's Effacement of the Soviet Union

The fact that scores and hundreds of workers holding diverse views come from Europe to Russia and peer into every nook and cranny undoubtedly indicates that interest in Russia will

grow month by month among the workers of the West. There is no doubt that this pilgrimage to Russia will grow (Stalin 1925a, 54, 1925b, 55).

In many respects, my study fills out some of the detail in Christina Pettersson's 'The Second World: Cold War Ideology and the Development of Post-

¹ The allusion is to Exodus 13:21-22.

² My focus is primarily on Stalin's texts, a rare enough exercise in our time when archival studies dominate (Blank 1994, 68-81, Pipes 1997, Smith 1999, 2005, Slezkine 2000, Suny and Martin 2001, Crouch 2002, Yekelchik 2002, Baberowski 2003, Hirsch 2005). Of these, the most astute are by Suny and Martin (Suny 1993, Martin 2001a). Despite the promise of van Ree's engagement with Stalin's texts, he misses some of the complexity and nuance of those texts (Van Ree 2003). The negative dimensions of Stalin's era have tended to dominate scholarship, the most extreme being Conquest's work (1992, 2015). This bias has obscured his significant achievements (Losurdo 2008). Instead, the negative and positive should be seen as part of a larger dynamic, which I will examine in a study called 'Towards a Materialist Doctrine of Evil'.

colonial Criticism' (In press). Her interest is in the transition between what Moore-Gilbert calls postcolonial criticism and postcolonial theory (1998). Postcolonial criticism concerns the long history of anti-colonial theory and practice before 1989, inspired as it mostly

Petterson's study has three parts. To begin with, she follows the work of others (Pletsch 1981, Pietz 1988, Chen 2010) in identifying the thinness, amnesia and persistence of Cold-War ideology in the determinations and transitions of 'three-world' theory. That the theory itself is imperialist and capitalist should be obvious (who is the 'first world'?). Postcolonial theory may at least have contested the category of the 'third' world, although it does so in a curiously benign manner. Thus, the 'third world' marks a shift in alignment after 1989, from the 'second world' to the 'first world', or it becomes a metaphor of underdevelopment, or 'postcolonial' becomes an alternative discursive marker for the 'third world'. The amnesia in question concerns not only how the 'third world' managed the extensive anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s and 1960s (through Soviet arms and assistance) that set up the possibility the post-colonial, but also how the 'second world' remains barely noticed, let alone understood. That is, while the 'third world' may have been partially contested, the 'second world' is simply unnoticed and forgotten. But this amnesia, tied in with self-congratulation at 'defeating' communism and thereby of a tripartite world, also enables a convenient neglect of the persistence of Cold-War ideologies today. Witness the struggle between Russia and Western Europe as I write, or the euphemistic 'pivot' to Asia by the United States, targeting the growing might of socialist countries such as China, let alone North Korea, Laos and Vietnam. As if the United States did not already have tens of

was by Marxist approaches. By contrast, postcolonial theory or discourse (Petterson prefers the latter term) marks the rapid consolidation of an approach after 1989 which focuses on theory and literature, drawing heavily on poststructuralist and deconstructionist tendencies.

thousands of troops, masses of military hardware and thousands of nuclear weapons in the area already (Japan, Philippines, Australia, South Korea and so on). But if one is concerned with discourse, with the textualisation of culture and with being part of the linguistic turn, then matters of states, geopolitics and economics are not seen to be relevant (Parry 2004).

The second part of Petterson's study focuses on the moment when postcolonial discourse may be said to have arrived. Through careful analysis of critical literature at the time, she shows that the common assertion that postcolonial theory arose during the 1980s simply does not hold up. The crucial turning point is 1989, after which postcolonial discourse is truly established as an academic approach. This entailed thorough de-politicisation, dematerialisation and de-contextualisation. I do not need to replicate the details of that analysis here, save to make a gloss on an arresting observation by Pletsch (1981, 576). If the socialist world provided the motivation of the three-worlds concept, was the *raison d'être* of the third world and the profound other of the first world, then the socialist world also provides the very means of postcolonial theory itself.

This is the import of the third section of Petterson's study, which is the most pertinent for my purposes. Here she argues that 'in the development of postcolonial discourse, an unacknowledged appropriation took place, an appropriation of central issues and agendas of the "Second World"' (Petterson In press, 3). In partic-

ular, she discusses the affirmative action program of the Soviet Union, which then became the practice in other socialist states, such as Yugoslavia and the GDR (her focus here is on the Sorbians). Apart from other socialist states in Eastern Europe, I would add that it continues in updated forms in the nationalities (minzu) policy in China. What Petterson means is that these socialist states not only saw themselves as inherently anti-colonial, but that they actively fostered minority voices, identities and their flourishing. Here indeed the subalterns did speak and they were enabled to do so precisely because of core policies of such states. Petterson's point, then, is that the thoroughgoing effacement of socialist countries (the 'second world') in postcolonial theory is not so much a case of careless forgetting, but rather a necessary act that enables postcolonial theory to claim those agenda as its own concerns.

In light of this argument, my concern is to explicate what exactly was meant by affirmative action, in theory and practice, with a focus on the Soviet Union. Even more, I seek to show that such a policy, which framed the constitutions of the Soviet Union, also created the theoretical basis for its consistent anti-colonial policies. The key figure in all this is Stalin.

Affirmative Action

Soviet Russia is performing an experiment without parallel hitherto in the world in organizing the cooperation of a number of nations and races within a single proletarian state on a basis of mutual confidence, of voluntary and fraternal agreement (Stalin 1920c, 375, 1920d, 362).

The affirmative action program³ of the

³ I follow Martin (2001a, 17), who translates *polozhitel'naia deiatel'not'* as 'affirmative action' – a shorthand for the policies fostered by Stalin.

Soviet Union was generated out of a unique answer to the apparently intractable tension between class and nation⁴. This problem vexed the socialist movements across Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, with some arguing that the universal category of class would lead to the abolition of national differences and others that 'national-cultural' factors were paramount⁵. Stalin's approach was different: he argued that a totalising unity produces hitherto unexpected levels of diversity. This is a thoroughly dialectical argument, in which the universal category of class provides a new approach to nationalities, and the dictatorship of the proletariat becomes the specific means for enabling such an approach (Stalin 1925c, 140-42, 1925d, 137-40)⁶. Thus, 'the victory of the Soviets and the establishment of the proletarian dictator-

⁴ We need to be careful not to read back into these debates the assumptions of an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) that inform our own perceptions. Thus, a 'nation' was not the political entity of a state, but rather the 'nationalities' within a state. These are now often called 'ethnic minorities', but this term is potentially misleading, since ethnicity was not necessarily a basic feature and the debates focused on both majority and minority nationalities.

⁵ The major proponent of the former was Karl Kautsky, while among those proposing the latter we find the Austrian Marxists Karl Renner and Otto Bauer, the national wing of the Bund (General Jewish Workers' Union of Lithuania, Poland, and Russia) and parts of the Caucasian Social Democrats (especially the Armenians). For a full discussion with all the references, see Boer's 'Against Culturism' (In press).

⁶ Yekelchik sees this point, but is mistaken in identifying the Soviet union as an empire (2002, 55). For a very useful background on the complex interweaving of class and nationality among different groups in the lead up to the revolution, see Suny (1993, 20-83). Thus, Stalin's insight was not a begrudging awareness of the persistence of national differences, as some suggest (Guins 1954, 213-25, Pipes 1997, Pinkus 1988, 50-51, Martin 2000, 2001b, Van Ree 2002, 64, 77-78, Weeks 2005, 567-68).

ship are a fundamental condition for abolishing national oppression, establishing national equality and guaranteeing the rights of national minorities' (Stalin 1921c, 20, 1921d, 19, see also Stalin 1923k, 269-70, 1923l, 262-63).

The result was the affirmative action program, which involved a comprehensive effort at social, cultural and economic recreation. Indeed, 'no country as yet has approached the vast scale of Soviet Affirmative Action' (Martin 2001a, 18)⁷. Minorities were identified, named and established in territories, where local language, culture, education and governance were fostered⁸. Dispersed minorities with no territory were provided with strong legal protections. I use the term 'recreation' quite deliberately, for it was very much a creative act, in which the biblical act of naming (Genesis 1-2) itself entailed the creation of groups, peoples and nations. As the report to the fifteenth congress of 1931 observed, this involved 'the creation of new nationalities out of tribes which had earlier never dreamed of national existence' (quoted in Martin 2001a, 155-56, see also Northrop 2001, 199). This dimension becomes clearer with the interchangeable use of the terms *politika* (policy) and *stroitel'stvo* (construction) – as with language policy (*iazykovaia politika*) and language construction (*iazykovoie stroitel'stvo*). In other words, the process was understood as the deliberate intervention by socialists into the process of producing and developing a new society, among which national groups played a central role (Reznik 2003, 34, Slezkine

2000, 323-24, Martin 2001b, 67). Most of the material concerning Soviet affirmative action involves policies, research teams, concrete programs, government departments (central and local) and the many significant achievements and mistakes made in the process. Terry Martin's work, *The Affirmative Action Empire* (2001a, 2001b), remains, despite its flaws⁹, the primary reference point for detailed archival investigation of such a program.

Theoretically, this approach goes back to the early platform (1903) of the Russian Social Democrats: 'The right of the population to receive instruction in their native tongue, to be realised by the provision, at the expense of the state and the organs of self-government, of the necessary schools; the right of every citizen to use his native language at assemblies; the introduction of native languages on a par with the official language in all local social and state institutions' (Party 1903, 290)¹⁰. At this stage, the platform was consciously developed in response to tsarist repression, which was as much religious as it was national (for example, Stalin 1917a, 17, 1917b, 16). However, it also required positive elaboration, which involved social recreation and the socialist imperative to foster local languages, cultures, education and political leadership; raising the border regions to socialism;

⁷ (Martin 2001a, 18). As Martin points out on the same page, the Soviet Union's affirmative action program significantly predates that of India's 'scheduled tribes' program of 1951.

⁸ This approach was already found in clauses 7 and 8 of the Russian Social Democratic Party platform of 1903 (Party 1903, 290, Stalin 1904a, 42, 1904b, 43).

⁹ Martin's work is peerless for its use of archival material, along with the sheer detail presented. However, he is less strong on theoretical matters, especially in relation to Stalin. For an earlier overview of the process and its contradictions, see Suny (1993, 98-112). For a study of the immense ethnographic efforts and participatory process, with a focus on 'census, map and museum', in the new project of defining and determining such 'nationalities', see Hirsch (1997, 2002), now gathered in her *Empire of Nations* (Hirsch 2005).

¹⁰ Note also clause 7, in which equal rights enhance class solidarity and the fighting ability of the proletariat: 'full equal rights for all citizens without regard to sex, religion, race or nationality' (Party 1903, 290, Stalin 1904a, 42, 1904b, 43).

and ‘cultural revolution’. It was embodied in the constitutions of 1924 and 1936.

Earlier, I pointed out that the Bolsheviks used the terms *politika* (policy) and *stroitel'stvo* (construction) interchangeably, seeing their task as an immense one of social and economic recreation. Or, as Stalin put it elsewhere:

We stand for the affirmative [pokrovitel'stvennaia politika] policy in relation to the development of the national cultures of the backward nationalities. I emphasize this so that [it will] be understood that we are not indifferent, but actively supporting [pokrovitel'stviushchie] the development of national culture (quoted in Martin 2001a, 17).

Some have interpreted this process as a well-high hubristic effort at social engineering, creating peoples, languages, and even classes where they no longer ‘existed’ after the chaos of world war, revolution and civil war (Martin 2000, Fitzpatrick 2014). But this is to misunderstand what is entailed with the creation of a whole new mode of production, not merely in terms of its economics but also society and its ideologies. The Marxist framework for Stalin’s thought, and indeed the whole Bolshevik program, embodied the insight that any mode of production or social formation is as much constructed as it is given. Or rather, such a mode of production may provide the context by which people are formed, but human beings shape the mode of production in question; or, to gloss Marx and make us wary of naturalising any social formation, we may be subject to the given circumstances of the past, but we make our own history (Marx 1852a, 103, 1852b, 96-97). In this light, the affirmative action program established territories of identifiable nationalities. As for dispersed minorities, even within such regions, they were provided with a stiff

framework of protections, including strong penalties for any form of racial denigration and abuse¹¹. They too – in a program of indigenization (*korenizatsiia*)¹² – should be able to use their own languages, operate their own schools, law-courts and soviets, and have freedom of conscience in matters relating to religion¹³. Across the Soviet Union, such programs cost millions and billions of roubles, leading to the wholesale creation and re-creation of cultures, as well as leading to a whole new range of problems not experienced thus far (Slezkine 2000, 322-23). A good example of subalterns being enabled to speak may be found with the indigenous Mordvinians, who had been highly assimilated, but took advantage of the affirmative action program to claim a distinct identity and were granted an autonomous oblast in 1929 (Martin 2001a, 52). Within the vast expanses of what would soon become the Soviet Union, this example was not unique¹⁴. The task of delineating and in-

¹¹ During the Second World War, Stalin explicitly contrasted the emphasis on racial equality in the Soviet Union, and indeed the strong penalties for any manifestation of racism, with Nazi racial hatred (Stalin 1942a, 31, 1942b, 97, 1944a, 394, 1944b, 198).

¹² *Korenizatsiia*, a term coined by the Bolsheviks, is ‘derived directly not from the stem *koren-* ("root"—with the meaning "rooting") but from its adjectival form *korennoi* as used in the phrase *korennoi narod* (indigenous people)’. The term was coined by the government, although Stalin consistently used *natsionalizatsiia* (Martin 2001a, 11-12, 2001b, 74).

¹³ Indeed, by the mid-1930s the Jews too were identified as a ‘nation’ with territory, having the Jewish Autonomous district in Birobidzhan (Stalin 1936a, article 22, 1936b, *stat'ia* 22). This importance of this move (part of Crimea had also been proposed) is rarely recognised, for it was the first – albeit problematic – move to Jewish territory in the modern era (Pinkus 1988, 71-76).

¹⁴ For the plethora of such names, see the various lists in Martin’s text, the collative effect of which is to create yet more names for distinct groups

deed creating groups, with their various levels – running into the tens of thousands, down to national districts of 25,000 to 10,000 people and even village Soviets with as few as 500 people (Martin 2001a, 10, 38, 413)¹⁵ – generated continual debate as to who belonged to which group, to what the various levels and groups were entitled, and constant alterations and refinements.

That it should undergo constant adaptation is no surprise, since such a project of social construction produced profound changes in the nature of the groups in question. Such change brings me to the next point concerning affirmative action: the task of ‘raising’ the cultural, social and economic level of the minority groups of the ‘border’ regions. At times, Stalin has a paternalistic tone, in which ‘backward’ peoples – as in ‘the East’ which is his model – should be brought up, should ‘catch up’ to the same level as ‘advanced’ peoples, in terms of economic, political and cultural organisation (Stalin 1921g, 39, 1921h, 39). At other times, it was seen as an extraordinary effort to bring them to the level of socialism within a short period (Stalin 1919a, 246-48, 1919b, 237-39, 1921a, 59-60, 1921b, 59, 1925c, 138-39, 1925d, 136-37, Priestland 2007)¹⁶. Thus, some areas may still have a pastoral economy and patriarchal-tribal ways of life, while others may function in terms of semi-patriarchal and semi-feudal structures (Stalin 1921c, 26, 1921d, 25, 1921g, 46, 1921h, 46, 1923g, 190-91, 1923h, 187-89). To raise them to the new and still

(2001a, 11, 68, 71, 167, 381-84, 386, 426, 436).

¹⁵ For example, in 1937 there were 11 union republics, 39 oblasti and kraia, 22 autonomous republics, 52 autonomous regions and okrugs, 3,307 districts and 62,484 village soviets (Davies et al. 2003, xviii).

¹⁶ Even on this point, he occasionally equates what is ‘literate and cultured’ with closeness between the people and the ‘Party and Soviet apparatus’ (Stalin 1923e, 335, 1923f, 328).

developing level of socialism really meant taking them directly from much earlier modes of production (tribal society and feudalism) to socialism (Stalin 1921g, 41, 1921h, 41)¹⁷. Yet, this could be done only by taking into account their specific economic situations, class structures, cultures and manners of life. So we find stipulations that they should develop and strengthen their Soviet statehood in light of their particular conditions; establish courts, administration, economic organisations and organs of power; foster presses, schools, theatres, recreation clubs and cultural and educational institutions – all of the above operating with the local language and staffed with local people who understand the specificities of local habits and customs (Stalin 1921e, 2, 1921f, 2, 1921c, 25, 1921d, 24, 1923e, 304, 1923f, 298, 1925e, 210-11, 1925f, 207-8).

In other words, as the affirmative action project gained specificity and scope, it became equated with raising such peoples to a socialist level. All of which is then summed up in Stalin’s definition of ‘cultural revolution’. We have been too influenced by the Chinese definition of Cultural Revolution, thereby missing the specific sense given to the term by Stalin. He of course attributes this slogan to Lenin, but defines it as ‘the cultural development of the working class and of the masses of the working peasantry, not only the development of literacy, although literacy is the basis of all culture, but primarily the cultivation of the ability to take part in the administration of the country’ (Stalin 1927a, 330-31, 1927b, 322)¹⁸. Obviously, such

¹⁷ Martin (2001a, 126) hints at this dimension, but does not see its full sense.

¹⁸ See Martin’s useful explication of the two dimensions of such cultural revolution, one involving attacks and ‘terror’ directed at the old cultural guard and the other an extraordinarily creative process of raising educational and cultural levels, especially in the ‘border regions’ (Martin 2001a,

cultural revolution applies in general to the working class and peasantry. But applied to the ‘border regions’, it means raising the cultural and political sensibilities among the workers and peasants of the minority peoples in the USSR¹⁹.

All of this was embodied in the constitutions of 1924 and 1936. Thus, in 1924 the principle is clearly stated, in which the dictatorship of the proletariat serves to ‘eradicate national oppression, to create an atmosphere of mutual confidence, and to lay the foundation for the fraternal co-operation of peoples’ (Stalin 1923c, 403, 1923d, 393)²⁰. This principle was elaborated in the ‘Stalin constitution’ of 1936 – ‘one of the most liberal of all time’ (Clark 2011, 190). Indeed, this constitution takes the logic further. Thus, if the principle applies to national minorities, then it should also apply to gender and religion. So we find the crucial article 123, which established equality of rights for all citizens ‘irrespective of their nationality or race, in all spheres of economic, state, cultural, social and political life’ (Stalin 1936a, article 123, 1936b, stat’ia 123). In order to avoid the impression of a neutral statement of rights, the article clarifies that any restriction of rights or the establishment of privileges of account of ethnicity or nationality, as well as ‘any advocacy of racial or national exclusiveness or hatred and contempt’, was to be punished by law²¹. So also for women. Article 122

155-56).

¹⁹ Myriad are the references, of which only a representative sample can be given (Stalin 1913a, 363-64, 1913b, 348-49, 1919c, 238, 1919d, 230, 1921e, 1921f, 1925c, 138-39, 1925d, 136-37, 1925e, 210-11, 1925f, 207-8).

²⁰ See also Stalin’s answer to a question on this matter from the first Labour Delegation to the Soviet Union from the United States (Stalin 1927g, 130-32, 1927h, 124-26).

²¹ In this case, the constitution formally recognised existing practice. Already in 1933, Stalin could write: ‘The U.S.S.R. is one of the few countries in

states that ‘women in the U.S.S.R. are accorded equal rights with men in all spheres of economic, state, cultural, social and political life’. Again, the proactive nature of this article is explained, in terms of equality – rights to work, pay, rest and leisure, social insurance, education – and specific measures for women, in terms of ‘state protection of the interests of mother and child, pre-maternity and maternity leave with full pay, and the provision of a wide network of maternity homes, nurseries and kindergartens’ (Stalin 1936a, article 122, 1936b, stat’ia 122). Yet, the greatest surprise may well be article 124 on religion. While the separation of church and state, and school from church, is stated, the reason is crucial: ‘to ensure to citizens freedom of conscience ... Freedom of religious worship and freedom of anti-religious propaganda is recognized for all citizens’ (Stalin 1936a, article 124, 1936b, stat’ia 124). Indeed, this article, which Stalin included in the face of stiff opposition, eventually led to the rapprochement between Stalin and the church in 1943. The church petitioned for buildings to be re-opened, religious personnel to be admitted to jobs, and religious candidates tried to run in the 1937 legislative elections (Fitzpatrick 2000, 179). Although the whole program may not have lived up to some of its lofty aims, and although the path was strewn with immense hurdles, its achievements were significant²².

the world where a display of national hatred or an unfriendly attitude towards foreigners as such is punishable by law’ (Stalin 1933a, 265, 1933b, 258).

²² Martin’s account begins by suggesting that the program failed, producing more ethnic conflict than solving such issues, but by the end of the book he produces statistics that indicate the program did in fact make a significant difference. As a good example of the difficult, ruptural and at times violent dimensions of such a process, see Payne’s excellent study of the Kazakh experience

Anti-Colonialism

The workers and peasants of the whole world want to preserve the Republic of Soviets ... as the pillar of their hopes of deliverance from oppression and exploitation, as a reliable beacon pointing the path to their emancipation (Stalin 1924c, 52, 1924d, 50).

With these developments in mind, I am able to move to Stalin's insight into anti-colonialism: the October Revolution and the affirmative action program of the Soviet Union is a microcosm of the global struggle against colonialism²³. In one respect, this insight is a logical extension of his earlier argument, in which a focus on class provides a distinct, dialectical, approach to the national question that leads to the world's first affirmative action program and constitutions. Once this logic is applied to ethnic and national minorities, it also may be applied to gender, religion, and then anti-colonial struggles. In 1921, Stalin observed that it was 'the Communists who first revealed the connection between the national question and the question of the colonies, who proved it theoretically and made it the basis of their practical revolutionary activities' (Stalin 1921a, 53, 1921b, 53). However, this theoretical breakthrough took some time to emerge, which I will follow through a number of key articles.

Already in 1918, in an article called 'The October Revolution and the National Question' (Stalin 1918c, 1918d), Stalin notes the uprisings – inspired by the Russian Revolution – in Austria-Hungary and Germany, seeing them as the beginning of much wider revolutionary activity in the common struggle against imperialism.

(2001).

²³ More than half a century ago, E. H. Carr noted the anti-colonial feature of Soviet policy as a 'natural and logical extension of national policy' (1953, 234-35), but none of the commentators I have consulted note this development in Stalin's thought.

Thus far, we may attribute his position to the widespread expectation of a European revolution, of which the Russian Revolution was the harbinger. But then he points out that such a focus is to miss the real revolutionary upsurge, for that is taking place in 'the East'. Does he mean here the eastern parts of Russia, the so-called 'border regions'? No, for he moves beyond the orbit of Russian influence: 'the East' becomes a term for all peoples oppressed by colonialism and semi-colonialism, including 'China, India, Persia, Egypt and Morocco' (Stalin 1918a, 175, 1918b, 172, see also Stalin 1923a, 182, 1923b, 178-79, 1923k, 243, 268, 1923l, 237-38, 263, 1925c, 135-36, 1925d, 133-34). In this light he can make the explicit connection between the national question and anti-colonial struggles: 'Thus, from the particular question of combating national oppression, the national question is evolving into the general question of emancipating the nations, colonies and semi-colonies from imperialism' (Stalin 1918c, 168, 1918d, 165). Aware of the breakthrough he has made, Stalin repeats his point in the conclusion, where he observes that the October Revolution has widened the scope of the national question, converting it from 'combating national oppression in Europe into the general question of emancipating the oppressed peoples, colonies and semi-colonies from imperialism' (Stalin 1918c, 170, 1918d, 166, see also Stalin 1927i, 175, 1927j, 170).

With this breakthrough concerning the 'international significance of the national question' (Stalin 1923k, 241, 1923l, 238), Stalin begins to explore what it means. Thus, in 'Concerning the Presentation of the National Question' (Stalin 1921a, 1921b)²⁴, he begins by castigating social-

²⁴ Many of the same points are made in 'The Foundations of Leninism' (Stalin 1924a, 143-55, 1924b, 138-49).

ists, especially of the Second International, for restricting their concerns on the national question to ‘civilised’ nations, such as the Irish, Czechs, Poles, Finns, Serbs, Armenians and Jews, thereby neglecting the millions upon millions of oppressed peoples in Asia and Africa. These global second-class citizens were not even on the radar of such socialists, except perhaps as an assumed necessity for the sake of maintaining ‘civilisation’. By contrast, it was precisely the revolutionary communists who ‘first revealed the connection between the national question and the question of the colonies, who proved it theoretically and made it the basis of their practical revolutionary activities’ (Stalin 1921a, 53, 1921b, 53)²⁵. Stalin is not reticent in claiming such an insight, one that he had first seen a few years earlier. Communism has broken down the invisible wall separating blacks from whites, the ‘uncultured’ from the ‘cultured’. How so? The connection is imperialist capitalism: communists make that their target, thereby connecting the various aspects of capitalist exploitation and uniting the proletarian movement and national liberation movements in the colonies into a common front. In particular, capitalism relies on the colonies for food and fuel, raw material for industry, markets to sell the items produced, and labour-power. Thus, imperialist capitalism depends upon on – here Stalin uses a favoured military metaphor – the ‘rear’ of the colonies for the ‘war’ waged at the ‘front’ (Stalin 1923k, 242, 1923l, 237). It follows, therefore, that one must attack both front and rear: the colonies cannot be liberated without the

overthrow of capitalism; so also, liberation movements in the colonies challenge the rule of capital. Without such activity, the victory of any socialist revolution is never entirely secure (Stalin 1921a, 57, 1921b, 57, 1923g, 187-88, 1923h, 185, 1924a, 150, 1924b, 145, 1927e, 247-48, 1927f, 243).

A few years later, in ‘The International Character of the October Revolution’ (Stalin 1927e, 247-50, 1927f, 243-45), he reiterates the points noted above and takes the argument a step further, with an arresting implication. To begin with, he argues that national-colonial revolutions also happened in Russia. He has in mind the national minorities, who were liberated from internal tsarist colonialism as a result of the October Revolution. Without landlords and capitalists to oppress such nations, they too were freed like the proletariat and peasants. Still the leadership and example of the proletarian revolution is to the fore, although the new note is the realisation that Russia too was a colonised country. The next step becomes more interesting, for he argues dialectically that national-colonial liberation happens only through internationalism – of the working class and peasantry: ‘It is a characteristic feature of the October Revolution that it accomplished these national-colonial revolutions in the U.S.S.R. ... not in the name of nationalism, but in the name of internationalism’ (Stalin 1927e, 248, 1927f, 243).

Conclusion

In the past, the oppressed and down-trodden slaves of the vast Roman Empire regarded Christianity as a rock of salvation. We are now reaching the point where socialism may serve (and is already beginning to serve!) as the banner of liberation for the millions who inhabit the vast colonial states of impe-

²⁵ Note also: ‘The national question was thereby transformed from a particular and internal state problem into a general and international problem, into a world problem of the liberation of the oppressed peoples in the dependent countries and colonies from the yoke of imperialism’ (Stalin 1924a, 144, 1924b, 139).

rialism (Stalin 1923i, 354, 1923j, 347).

I have followed through the articulation of the world's first and most comprehensive affirmative action program, which then provided the theoretical basis for developing a consistent anti-colonial position, in which colonialism was understood as capitalist. But what of the practical implication? Here two factors are important. First, Soviet policies insisted on the right to self-determination by colonized peoples. This right meant that they should and could throw off the colonial yoke and manage their own affairs. But since colonial powers were often far more powerful, the colonised peoples would need assistance (Stalin 1924a, 144-45, 1924b, 139-40). Thus, the 'Land of the Soviets' became directly involved in anticolonial struggles. Not only was the October Revolution also national-colonial liberation (as I pointed out above), and not only was liberation from capitalist imperialism a core Soviet policy, but the ultimate fate of the Soviet Union itself depended on revolutionising of the 'remote rear' of imperialism in order to overcome the latter (Stalin 1923k, 241-43, 1923l, 236-38). Thus, the Soviet Union, along with other socialist movements, should 'support – resolutely and actively to support – the national liberation movement of the oppressed and dependent peoples' (Stalin 1924a, 147, 1924b, 142). For these reasons, the consistent flow of arms, technology, advice, and much more assisted these anti-colonial movements, from the Chinese Revolution to liberation movements in Africa and Latin America (Stalin 1924a, 147-49, 1924b, 142-44)²⁶.

²⁶ Albeit not without discernment: Stalin realises that every case is different, depending on the stages of capitalism and class development (Stalin 1924a, 147-49, 1924b, 142-44, 1925c, 147-52, 1925d, 144-49). The lurking question here is whether the Soviet Union was an imperialist and (internal) colonising power, as many have pro-

This concrete manifestation of the anti-colonial policy, arising from the affirmative action program of the Soviet Union itself, greatly assisted with creating the historical conditions of post-colonialism. The massive decolonization of many parts of the world in the 1950s and 1960s were in part a direct result of these policies. But affirmative action and anti-colonialism also provided the theoretical groundwork for postcolonial theory, for through them the subaltern was enabled to speak in hitherto unexpected diversity. However, as Petterson points out, with the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1989-1991, along with the hastily proclaimed 'end' of communism, these achievements were both consigned to the garbage bin of history and furtively scavenged for a de-historicized and de-contextualised theoretical elaboration after 1989. Subalterns were indeed speaking in many voices, but postcolonial theory seems unable to listen.

claimed, including NATO (Viola 1996, Werth et al. 1999, Loring 2014)? The beginning of an answer would be the astute observation that the Soviet Union was not a federation, not a nation-state, not an empire, not a colonising power but an entirely new state formation (Suny 1993, 85, Martin 2001a, 15, 19, 461, Weeks 2005, 567). It may perhaps be described as a multi-national socialist state, but a thorough examination of the nature this new state formation still needs to be done.