

Debates on nomadic feudalism in Soviet thought



The discussion in Soviet anthropology and historiography of the social and political organization of nomadic societies has passed through several stages. In the 1920s and early 1930s, many approaches were explored: some researchers spoke in favour of the primitive tribal nature of nomadic societies, while others persisted in stressing their statehood character. Since the mid-1930s, with the establishment of the Stalinist regime and the beginning of mass repressions and genocide against the Soviet people, the theory of nomadic feudalism came to prevail.

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HOWEVER, WITHIN THAT FRAMEWORK there were still dissenting views. If, according to the official point of view, the basis of nomadic feudalism was the ownership of land, in the opinion of others nomadic society was based on the ownership of cattle. These disagreements led to several heated discussions, and the most vehement disagreements came to the fore between 1953 and 1955. After the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956, small steps were taken towards the democratic transformation of the country, and the ideological pressure of communist despotism was somewhat lifted from the social sciences. Consequently, many researchers started to explore new approaches and to present non-traditional solutions to scientific problems.

In the 1970s and 1980s, many theories were further developed. One of the most consistent critics of the nomadic feudalism theory, Professor Genadiy Markov (Moscow University), showed that the social organization of Mongols, Kazakhs and Turkmen was, in principle, similar to that of the earlier nomads and had little in common with feudalism. He distinguished the community-nomadic and military-nomadic conditions of nomadism, the military-democratic social organization of nomadic societies, and the unstable and ephemeral political formations, such as nomadic empires. At the same time, alternative directions in the study of nomads were taken. These assumed the presence of a class system and the formation of states. Along this line, some researchers persisted in the possibility of a slave-holding stage of evolution of the nomads,¹ although others convincingly demonstrated the impossibility of the evolution of slavery relations among nomads.²

There were also other points of view. The Georgian scholar Melikishvili considered that the nomads constituted a specific form of an early state. 'Nomadic', 'oriental' and 'highland' feudalisms are, in his opinion, different variants of the evolution of early state societies. A member of the Kazakh Academy of Sciences, Kshibekov, argued that the nomads should be considered within the framework of the Marxist model of the *Gemeinwesen* of Asiatic type, but without developed despotism.

Nomadic feudalism

One can identify several independent theories among the advocates of the presence of feudalism among the nomads. First, there is the orthodox understanding of nomadic feudalism, based on traditional historical materialism. The basis of feudalism, in this context, is private ownership of land. The ancient nomads are considered as tribal or early slave-holding formations, while the medieval and (pre-)modern nomads formed feudal societies. Second, there is the so-called *saun* theory. Its advocates assume that cattle was the main factor of production in nomadic pastoral societies, rather than land. Hence, rich cattle owners giving livestock to poor nomads for pasture (*saun*) was the ground of feudal relationships.

The third approach is going back to the specific concept of nomadic feudalism that was advocated by the Member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, Boris Ya. Vladimirtsov, a well-known specialist on the Mongols. His supporters hold the Marxist point of view that ownership relations are an expression of real economic relations. For this reason, ownership of land and ownership of cattle cannot be regarded as the basis of the feudal mode of production. In their opinion, the essence of nomadic feudalism lies in power relations and it is necessary to analyse the vertical social relations between nomadic aristocracy and ordinary nomads.

Above: Cattle crossing the Dushanbe-Kyrgyz Border Road. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons license, courtesy of the Asian Development Bank on Flickr.com

Fourth, there is a theory presented by the Moscow archaeologist, Svetlana Pletneva and her followers, who distinguish an evolution of nomadic societies from military democratic to semi-settled 'nomadic towns' with a stable feudal state. The main channel of establishing feudal relations, in the opinion of Pletneva, was the settlement of impoverished pastoralists in winter camps. The fifth theory is presented by a large group of researchers, who speak in favour of the existence of undeveloped patriarchal forms of feudalism, but without particular evidence relative to its internal nature.³

Nomadic societies as early states

An intermediate position in the above discussion is occupied by those who discuss nomadic societies as examples of early states. They say that it is necessary to consider nomads as part of a much wider macro-system that they shared with settled agriculturists. In this context, their development and internal organization were affected by successful or unsuccessful conquests and attempts to levy tribute. Therefore, the nomads may independently have reached the early-class stage, while their further development was determined by their relations with neighbouring farmer communities. In the main, this approach in Soviet literature was developed by the well-known nomadologist, Anatoly Khazanov, now professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He proposed to call this theory the ecological approach.⁴

A distinctive hypothesis for state formation among the nomads was proposed by the Siberian archaeologist, Anatoly Martynov. He supposed that nomads in their evolution escaped the "barbarism" stage and created an original "steppe civilization". In order to illustrate this thesis he used a diagram with a division of history into savagery-barbarism-civilization, as described in *Ancient Society* by Lewis H. Morgan and in *Ursprung* by Friedrich Engels.

Nomadism and Marxism

Nomadism, in general, confronts Marxism with the same fundamental problems as the Asiatic Mode of Production. Neither nomads nor the East (the Orient) fit into the common Marxist-hypothesized evolution of humanity, from the primitive stage to Communism. The problem arises from the impossibility of interpreting the superficially motionless and cyclically evolving nomads within the framework of progressivist (and I would add, Eurocentrist) theories of human history, which also include Marxism. Another serious problem is the difficulty of representing the socio-political organization of nomads in terms of the Marxist conceptual system. How can we explain from the Marxist point of view such a paradoxical fact that, among the nomads, private property in means of production (i.e., livestock) has appeared practically in parallel with the formation of nomadism as an economic-cultural type, long before the advance of private property among the agriculturists, whereas, as their socio-economic level is concerned, the nomads were less developed than sedentary people? How accurate is it to assign the nomadic pastoralists to the primitive stage, when there was private ownership of livestock and persons were allowed to accumulate property in large quantities? Conversely, how can one consider nomads to be primitive, even if they had no state bureaucratic apparatus?

Finally, how should nomadism be interpreted within the framework of one of the basic methodological principles of historical materialism: the law of correspondence between basis and superstructure? According to Marxist theory, changes in the basis lead inevitably to the respective transformation in the superstructure (in the form of revolutions). The economic basis of nomadism-pastoralism has actually remained unchanged over the course of many centuries. Ancient, medieval and even more recent nomads have had a similar herd composition, strictly determined by the ecological conditions of habitat, primitive and easily transportable tin ware and analogous household technology. However, pastoral 'superstructure' did not demonstrate the permanency of the basis. The nomads sometimes created tribal alliances, but also formed the gigantic nomadic empires under the dominion of mighty leaders and then again disbanded into separate khanates, tribes and even smaller groups.

Civilization theory and nationalism

In the years of perestroika and after the collapse of the USSR, many researchers from the countries of the former socialist block turned their back on Marxism. They turned instead to the civilization theory, because it appeared to many of them to offer a fresh look at history.⁵ Some scholars promulgated it as the universal paradigm that should replace Marxism. Others believed that civilization theory should substitute the obsolete approach of different modes of production. However, it should be noted that post-Soviet scholars do not share a common understanding of the civilization theory. One can identify several different interpretations. For example, in Kazakhstan and in Kyrgyzstan local scholars write about the Kazakh and Kyrgyz civilizations, where it became stylish to write about national statehood. If, in Soviet times, it was prestigious to show that people had 'nomadic feudalism', then after the collapse of the USSR, and Marxism being out of fashion, theories were proposed that referred to the construction of one's own nation and state.

In many multi-national republics of Russia, papers have been published in which the existence of specific civilizations is substantiated. So, the Bashkir, Buryat, Kalmyk, Tatar, Yakut, and other civilizations emerged. Each of the ethnic groups, having achieved its statehood (as an independent post-Soviet state or republic within the Russian Federation), aspires to construct its past and to prove the ancient origins of its nation. Essentially, the civilizational analysis appears as a form of nationalism. It is, so it appears, a common ideology of weaker and economically less powerful countries, which wish to escape from the colonialism of the Big Brother. In this case, the pretences of national elites, to cultural uniqueness and an ancient civilization older than that of the Russians, present an attempt to construct their own ideology of nationalism. The idea of ancient nation construction is thus another, parallel form of political legitimization for the local ruling establishment. For example, it is common practice in Yakutia to relate the past to the medieval Kyrgyz and even the Xiongnu Empire. The ethnic elites use these political myths for legitimization and pretences to rule. They underline a long experience in state-building and a genetic memory of the state.

Thus, in conclusion, in the Soviet period 'nomadic feudalism' was a form of national identity for various minorities. For the scholars of the metropolis, nomadic feudalism was a form of Orientalism. In the last quarter of the 20th century, many scholars in post-socialist countries believed that the introduction of the civilizational analysis would allow them to differentiate themselves from their foreign colleagues in matters of theoretical developments. But these illusions must be abandoned. In practice, the civilizational analysis has become a form of nationalism only.

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