

Nino Maisuradze

Associate Researcher at the Institute of Politology, Ilia State University;

A guest lecturer at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

Joseph Stalin's Definition of the Nation: Key Aspects and Its Theoretical Limitations¹

Abstract

This research examines Joseph Stalin's definition of the nation and its compatibility with contemporary theories of nationalism. Stalin's formulation links the existence of a nation to the combination of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up. This formulation, for decades, functioned as the dominant interpretative framework within the Soviet intellectual tradition and significantly influenced the academic discourse in Georgia as well. The aim of the study is to provide a substantive, comparative, and critical analysis of Stalin's formulation to identify its strengths and weaknesses, as well as the theoretical limitations that hinder its applicability within modern nationalism studies.

This study draws on the analysis of secondary sources, which allows Stalin's definition to be understood as an important component of Soviet intellectual heritage. The comparative perspective demonstrates that Stalin's rigidly formalized criteria fail to capture the diversity of contemporary national identities, including diasporic, plural, and multilingual forms. The study addresses a central puzzle: why has this definition continued to influence academic discussions of the national question despite its theoretical limitations? The study concludes that although Stalin's definition was historically important within the Soviet understanding of the nation, today it persists primarily as a tool for legitimizing ethnocentric political claims rather than as a viable analytical framework.

Keywords: Joseph Stalin, concept of nation, national question, theories of nationalism.

¹ This work was supported by Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia (SRNSFG) [N° FR-24-17422].

Introduction

In Soviet literature, the analysis of the national question was largely grounded in the definition of the nation formulated by Joseph Stalin. In this model, a nation is a historical community formed by a shared language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup (Davitashvili, 2003).

In 1913, Stalin's *Marxism and the National Question* was published, where his definition of the nation was formulated and quickly became influential. Stalin's work was a direct response to the Austro-Marxist conception of the nation, which was gaining considerable attention during this period. Karl Renner had formulated the "personality principle" in discussing the nation, arguing that nationality, by its very nature, has no relationship to land or territory (Nimni, 2005). The nation is a cultural community of modern individuals no longer tied to any specific territory. Today, social bonds have replaced territorial ones: individuals are closer to one another than to the land. The accelerated process of globalization and rapid population mobility have made people independent of territory. In a world of migration and differential development, territorial boundaries are porous. The nation, therefore, is a personal rather than territorial bond.

In 1907, Otto Bauer published "The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy", in which he identified national character as the primary marker of the nation. For Bauer, national character was a historically modified characteristic that binds the members of a national community together at any given historical period. It can change due to historical circumstances, as well as through contemporary collective experience that transforms the group's culture. For this reason, it is not correct to emphasize only the experience of previous generations. In Bauer's view, the intersection of both dimensions, the historical and the contemporary, is the central component in defining the modern concept of national character (Bauer, 2000).

Stalin categorically rejected this framework. By grounding the nation in objective, material indicators, above all a shared territory and a unified economic life, he sought to refute the Austro-Marxist claim that nations could be defined through cultural bonds alone, without reference to territory or economic structure. For Stalin, a nation was not a voluntary cultural association but a materially grounded community. This opposition to Bauer and Renner explains why his formulation emphasizes territorial integrity and economic cohesion as indispensable preconditions for a nation, and why the political dimension of the state is entirely absent from his model: Stalin was not writing a general theory of nationalism, but a polemical response to a rival Austro-Marxist position.

Despite these polemical origins, for many years, it was regarded as such an authoritative text that alternative interpretations of the nation were dismissed as pointless, on the assumption that the concept required no further refinement. Georgia was no exception – Stalin's definition of the nation became a central subject of discussion there as well.

The aim of this study is to provide a theoretical analysis of Stalin's conception of the nation and to evaluate it against modern theories of nationalism. This approach allows us to assess the contemporary intellectual significance of Stalin's concept, including its strengths and weaknesses, thereby enabling a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the issue.

Furthermore, this study enables us to reconsider Stalin's model through the lens of contemporary theoretical frameworks in nationalism studies and to address a central puzzle: given the well-established theoretical limitations of Stalin's formulation, why has it continued to shape academic discussions of the national question long after its shortcomings have been identified?

The study offers a novel perspective by combining historical and theoretical analysis to evaluate Stalin's model of the national question. The study offers two key innovative contributions:

- 1) It challenges the long-standing tradition in Georgia of uncritical acceptance of Stalin's definition within the context of Soviet intellectual heritage and reveals the internal contradictions of this formulation;
- 2) It assesses Stalin's model from the perspective of contemporary theories of nationalism, in which definitions of the nation are understood as multifaceted and complex constructs.

Based on the research aim, the following objectives were defined:

- 1) To conduct a content analysis of Stalin's definition of the nation.
- 2) To compare Stalin's concept with the conceptualizations of the nation developed within major contemporary theories of nationalism.
- 3) To identify the strengths and weaknesses of Stalin's formulation.

The hypothesis advanced here is that the definition's endurance is rooted not in its explanatory power, but in its ideological function within Soviet Marxist thought and the intellectual habits it produced. Stalin reduced the nation to a fixed set of material criteria, namely language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup, because this framework was uniquely suited to a doctrine in which national identity had to be subordinated to class struggle. What makes this hypothesis relevant today is that these intellectual habits did not simply disappear with the end of the Soviet Union. The concept continues to shape how the national question is approached in post-Soviet academic spaces, because it remains embedded in a conceptual tradition. This study tests that hypothesis by examining both the definition's internal logic and the ideological purposes it was designed to serve, and comparing it with contemporary theories of nationalism.

The research design is qualitative, and the primary method employed is the analysis of secondary sources, through which Stalin's formulation of the nation is examined in depth. This approach makes it possible to treat the definition as a conceptual formulation that shaped the Soviet intellectual framework surrounding the idea of the nation and significantly influenced the Georgian intellectual sphere as well. In addition to the analysis of secondary literature, the study incorporates a comparative approach, comparing Stalin's definition of the nation with the conceptualizations developed within modern theories of nationalism.

Key Characteristics of Joseph Stalin's Definition of the Nation

For Stalin, a nation is a community that is not defined by racial or tribal ties. Instead, the bond that unites a nation is of a fundamentally historical character. This means that a nation is a historically formed community. Here, however, a question arises: can every historical community be considered a nation? To provide greater clarity, he introduces four essential features that must be present for a community to qualify as a nation. Accordingly, the answer is negative: we may call a community a nation only if it possesses a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup.

Let us consider each of these characteristics and their specific features as defined by Stalin. The first criterion necessary for recognizing a community as a nation is a common language. A shared language, Stalin argues, is indispensable for the existence of a nation, and it is unacceptable for a single nation to speak multiple languages. At the same time, it is possible for different nations to speak the same language. A clear example of this, according to Stalin, is the case of the English and the Americans (Stalin, 2012).

The second criterion for the existence of a nation is territory. Although the inclusion of territory as a marker of the nation was not unusual in works on the national question produced during Stalin's time, the way he conceptualizes territory is rather general. In Stalin's view, a nation emerges through sustained interaction, and such regular interaction and a stable communicative unity require a common territory. Using the same example of England and America, he argues that migration to a different territory and long-term separation eventually led to the formation of a new American nation. Thus, territorial separation resulted in the emergence of distinct nations. However, the significance of territory should not be understood as fundamentally determinative in nation formation. Stalin emphasizes that internal economic ties can maintain the unity of a nation. Without this economic cohesion, neither territory nor language alone is sufficient to constitute a nation.

The third criterion is the unity of economic life. For Stalin, such unity became possible only with the development of capitalism. He reinforces this argument with concrete examples, noting that, for instance, the Georgian people, prior to the reforms, lived within a shared territory and spoke a common language, yet did not constitute a single nation. This was because they were divided into separate, isolated principalities. It was only the development of the economy and the rise of capitalism that made possible the division of labor among different regions (Nikoleishvili, 2000).

The doctrinal centrality of economic cohesiveness was not just analytical. His concentration on a unified economic existence meant that the nation was always subordinated to the theory of class: if national identity is established in material conditions, then national divisions are ultimately a product of capitalism and will disappear with its overthrow. In this context, the economic criterion was not just one element out of four - it was the fundamental criterion for him.

The fourth criterion is a spiritual characteristic, or spiritual cohesion, which is reflected in national culture. Because this psychological makeup, what contemporary theory would term national identity, manifests itself in cultural expression, it is possible to observe its development and transformation over time. This spiritual connection is created and sustained by successive generations. It is a temporally extended phenomenon that exists at every moment of a nation's life.

Each of these criteria had been familiar elements within the broader discussion of the national question. Stalin's originality lies in his emphasis on their totality: all four characteristics must be present for a community to qualify as a nation. If even one of these characteristics is absent, the community cannot be considered a nation.

In addition to identifying specific markers of the nation, his work also addresses the question of the nation's rights, an issue that was particularly sensitive and significant in the Georgian context. He emphasizes that a nation possesses the right to autonomous self-organization and, furthermore, the right to secession. However, this does not imply that a nation should exercise this right under all circumstances or in every situation. Stalin holds that autonomy or separation will not necessarily be beneficial for the majority of a nation's members in all cases (Stalin, 2012).

Avtandil Nikoleishvili rightly observes that in the introduction and first chapter of "Marxism and the National Question", Stalin expresses a distinctly anti-nationalist position, which is then contrasted in the second chapter with his recognition of the principle of national self-determination. While at the level of general theoretical discussion, Stalin acknowledges the right of nations to self-determination, his position becomes inconsistent when applied to concrete cases - particularly to the peoples living within the Russian Empire and their right to make free national choices. In such instances, his views contradict the very principle he affirms earlier.

Moreover, Stalin categorically opposes the idea of cultural-national autonomy, regarding such demands as fundamentally mistaken, especially in the case of the Caucasus. He argues that most people of the Caucasus possess a primitive level of culture, whereas cultural-national autonomy presupposes a claim to autonomy by a nation with a developed cultural foundation (Nikoleishvili, 2000).

Stalin's Model of the Nation in the Context of Modern Theories of Nationalism: A Comparative Analysis

To begin with, contemporary theories of nationalism are strongly shaped by Western perspectives. The leading authors in the major theoretical traditions on nationalism come from the West, and within Western intellectual traditions, the formation of a nation is seldom discussed independently of statehood. Consequently, in widely accepted Western theories, statehood is considered one of the defining features of a nation.

In contrast, Soviet scholarly tradition adopted Stalin's notion of the nation as its guiding framework. Within the broader debates of the period, a summary article published in the journal "*Voprosy Istorii*" ("Вопросы Истории") between 1966 and 1969 concluded that Stalin's definition remained valid and that the only task was to interpret it correctly. Stalin's notion fundamentally diverged from Western theories of the nation, in which the concepts of nation and state are treated as nearly identical (Davitashvili, 2003).

A central question in theories of the nation - around which the major theoretical approaches diverge - is the following: When does the nation emerge, and what is its point of origin? Stalin's answer can be formulated as follows: in the pre-capitalist period, the nation does not exist; the nation emerges during the formation of capitalism. The foundation of national development, in his view, is the capitalist economy.

The most influential theory of nationalism is modernism. According to the modernist perspective, nations are a relatively recent phenomenon, existing for only the past two centuries. The formation of nations begins after the French Revolution and is regarded as a product of the modern era (Davitashvili, 2003). For many authors associated with this approach, the rise of industrial society constitutes a necessary precondition for the emergence of nations - Ernest Gellner being a prominent example.

According to the modernist theory, the nation is a product of industrial society. In this respect, both modernism and Stalin's definition link the emergence of nations to processes characteristic of the modern historical period. However, their interpretations differ fundamentally - an unsurprising divergence given that each approach was formulated within distinct historical and intellectual contexts.

The main differences may be summarized as follows: The characteristics that constitute Stalin's definition of the nation are presented as objective and measurable indicators. The fourth criterion, psychological makeup expressed through culture and transmitted across generations, is not conceptualized by Stalin as something formed through discourse. Within this framework, nations appear as stable and homogeneous groups.

Regardless of which approach within modernism we examine, it becomes clear that the emphasis consistently falls on industrialization, which is seen as the primary force driving the formation of nations. In Gellner's account, under conditions of industrialization, the bureaucratic element becomes dominant, and a neutral language is established for communication. The society formed under these conditions is one of continuous growth and progress. The homogeneity created in this era of universal high culture manifests itself in the form of nationalism (Gellner, 1983).

The characteristics of a nation are not understood as pre-given but rather as constructed and transformed in accordance with modern social factors - most notably the role of mass education and the spread of print capitalism. In Benedict Anderson's well-known definition, nations are "imagined communities" formed not through objective, inherent attributes but through shared acts of imagination (Anderson, 1991). As for the political transformations emphasized within modernism, Stalin's formulation does not address the elements highlighted by this approach - particularly the role of elites and the creation of invented traditions (Hobsbawm, 1992). These aspects, central to modernist interpretations of nation formation, are absent from Stalin's conceptualization.

Stalin's approach and modernist notions are not just academically different - they have huge practical implications. Stalin regards the nation as an objective fact: a community has all four traits, or it is not a nation. Anderson, by contrast, views the nation as an imagined community - a construct of subjective affiliation. Stalin's method becomes the definition of a classificatory device: if a community

does not match all four objective criteria, it may be denied national recognition. This principle was immediately operationalized in Soviet policy: communities judged inadequately developed as nations were subjected to assimilation or, in the worst circumstances, were deported. Anderson's concept, on the other hand, emphasizes the subjective will of a group to conceive itself as a nation, regardless of whether it has an economic unity.

In conclusion, the various definitions of the nation proposed by modernist theorists stand in clear opposition to Stalin's formulation. The primary reason for this contrast lies in the fundamentally different purposes behind their creation. Stalin's concept is instrumental and lacks analytical depth, designed above all to align with Marxist class analysis. By contrast, the theoretical aim of modernist nationalism is to explain the emergence and development of nations and nationalism, rather than to justify any particular political or economic structure.

About ethnosymbolism and Stalin's concept of the nation, the two approaches differ radically. The only point of convergence lies between Stalin's fourth attribute and the foundational elements of the ethnosymbolist understanding of the nation. Stalin conceptualizes psychological makeup (or national identity) primarily in terms of culture, and the emphasis on shared cultural elements - such as collective values, traditions, myths, and symbols - in ethnosymbolism may be loosely connected to this idea. Nevertheless, this similarity is only superficial. In ethnosymbolism, and particularly in the work of Anthony D. Smith, the focus shifts to the reinterpretation and continual reappropriation of these cultural elements by successive generations. The concept of reinterpretation is central: it underscores the dynamic transformation of the core components of national identity over time. In Stalin's framework, although the psychological makeup is produced across generations, the element of reinterpretation is not emphasized. Rather than highlighting an active process of cultural redefinition, Stalin presents it as an inherited set of experiences passed down through generations, lacking the transformative dimension central to ethnosymbolist theory.

Regarding the differences, Stalin's definition holds that a community either meets all four features or it cannot be considered a nation at all. In contrast, ethnosymbolism understands the nation as a flexible and evolving community, held together by shared myths and symbols.

The principal point of divergence concerns the period of the nation's emergence. For Stalin, nations arise in the era of capitalism, and because economic integration is decisive, nations cannot exist in the pre-modern period. This view completely overlooks the existence of precursor ethnic communities. According to ethnosymbolism - and particularly to its leading representative, Anthony D. Smith - prior to the nation, we can identify ethnic communities that differ from nations yet possess certain similar features. These communities, termed "ethnies," may be compared to the core characteristics of nations. Self-identification and shared myths are fundamental traits of both ethnies and nations. However, while a nation possesses a shared history, an ethnie has only a shared memory. While a nation has a public culture, a homeland, and obligations linked to collective rights, an ethnie is characterized by a set of cultural attributes, a symbolic connection to ancestral territory, and solidarity - primarily at the elite level. Moreover, a nation is defined by a unified economic life, a feature absent from ethnies (Smith, 2010).

Crucially, in ethnosymbolism, symbolic continuity and the cultural interconnectedness of national characteristics carry far greater significance than economic ties.

Comparing primordialism with Stalin’s notion of the nation is misguided from the outset, as the two approaches share no common foundations. For primordialism, the nation and nationality constitute a natural, enduring form of human existence - nations have always existed. For Stalin, however, nations emerge only because capitalism creates a unified economic market. Cultural cohesion, in this view, is merely a consequence of economic integration rather than its precursor.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that Stalin’s definition of the nation functions more as a political instrument than as an analytical category. His formulation is closely aligned with the logic of Marxist theory. In the 1913 work, it is evident that Stalin adopts Karl Marx’s view on the origins of the nation, linking the emergence of nations directly to the rise of capitalism.

Table 1. Key conceptual differences between Stalin's definition and contemporary theories of nationalism

Aspect	Stalin’s concept	Contemporary theories of nationalism
Nature of the nation	Objective, materially, determined, stable	Constructed, imagined (Anderson), symbolically constituted (Smith)
Criteria for a nation	All four elements must be present simultaneously	National belonging is flexible and context-dependent
Role of the state	Absent (territory is not a political category)	Central (the state is the key to the nation-building)
Purpose	Political instrument for classification - determines who qualifies as a nation	Explanatory frameworks - aimed at understanding how and why nations emerge

Critical Analysis and Assessment of Stalin’s Definition of the Nation

Stalin’s work “Marxism and the National Question” was published in 1913 and gained considerable popularity in Georgia. For several decades following its publication, it was widely assumed that Stalin had provided an exhaustive analysis of the national question and that the only task remaining for

scholars was to comment on and interpret his ideas. Despite this strong influence, the shortcomings of Stalin's concept are clearly visible, and in what follows, I will examine these limitations systematically:

- 1) Stalin insists that all four markers, language, territory, economic cohesion, and psychological makeup, must be present for a community to qualify as a nation. However, historical examples (for instance, the Jewish nation) clearly demonstrate that nations can emerge even without the simultaneous presence of all four elements. For this reason, contemporary theories do not reduce the existence of a nation to a fixed checklist in which each characteristic is strictly required.

Stalin himself focuses precisely on the Jewish example in responding to Otto Bauer, who considered Jews a nation on the grounds that they possessed a unity of character - or, as Bauer termed it, a "unity of destiny". For Stalin, it was impossible to speak of a shared destiny among Jews scattered across Georgia, Russia, and America. They are physically distant from one another, inhabit different territories, and speak different languages. These Jews share economic and political life, as well as a cultural atmosphere, not with each other but with the Georgians, Russians, and Americans among whom they live. Stalin concluded that Jews residing in different territories retain little more than a common religion, a common origin, and a few remnants of national character. His definition was designed as an exclusionary instrument - a deliberate political tool to deny national status to certain groups, most immediately the Jewish population. His aim was to reduce the influence of the Bund, the Jewish Social Democratic Party.

This recognition reframes Stalin not merely as a theorist of nationalism, but as a political strategist. The Soviet federal structure was built on the principle that a community qualified as a full nation only if it met Stalin's criteria. Groups that did not were denied national status. The definition did not simply describe nations - it decided which communities would be treated as such. This is why it endured: not because of its analytical value, but because it was essential to the way the Soviet Union was organized. As Terry Martin (2001) has shown, the Soviet Union functioned as an "affirmative action empire", deliberately creating national identities through geographical delimitation, linguistic policy, and the development of national elites. The foundation of this whole project was Stalin's four criteria (Martin, 2001).

- 2) Multinational or multilingual cases cannot be explained through this notion (for example, Switzerland).
- 3) I agree with Guram Koranashvili's observation that Stalin treats the category of territory in an overly general manner. This marker requires greater conceptual clarity. It remains unclear whether Stalin is referring to ethnic territory or political territory. In the former case, members of a nation may reside outside the borders of a state, whereas in the latter, the territory is strictly defined by state boundaries (Koranashvili, 1997).

- 4) The fourth criterion also requires greater conceptual clarity. Is psychological makeup identical to national character? We must assume that it is. If this assumption holds, the category itself requires significant expansion, since national character also encompasses attitudes and dispositions that are far more changeable than its more stable components. If psychological makeup is indeed equivalent to national character, then it becomes necessary to consider the concept of national self-consciousness as well, because such a form of psychological cohesion cannot be meaningfully analyzed without reference to national consciousness.
- 5) Stalin does not address the relationship between the nation and the state, nor does he consider the “state-nation” model - the concept according to which a nation forms within the framework of a state. In this perspective, the shared sovereignty and unified institutions of the state diminish cultural differences among the ethnic groups residing within it. In other words, the state creates the nation. The German historian Friedrich Meinecke developed this model and contrasts the “state-nation” with the phenomenon of the “nation-state,” in which a cultural community forms first and, with the rise of national self-awareness, develops a demand for its own national state. In Meinecke’s view, most Western European national states emerged through the state-nation model (Davitashvili, 2003).

The tradition of linking the concept of the nation with the state originates with Max Weber, whose approach treats the nation fundamentally as a political category. However, the political dimension is entirely absent from Stalin’s definition: what we encounter instead is solely the economic bond. Even the concept of territory cannot be interpreted politically in Stalin’s framework, since territory is treated merely as a space necessary for stable interaction among members of the nation. There is no discussion of state-defined borders, the exercise of sovereignty, or the homogenizing function of shared state institutions.

But this exclusion is not accidental. The Marxist view sees the state as a tool of class oppression, something that must wither away when a classless society is reached. The nation was defined by Stalin solely in terms of material and economic conditions, and the state could not be a criterion of formulation - this would have been contrary to the basic logic of Marxist theory. The omission of the state from his concept is, accordingly, not an oversight or gap, but rather an implication of his ideological beliefs.

- 6) One problematic assumption, one that has not been confirmed by historical experience, is Stalin’s claim that the nation is a temporary phenomenon. For Stalin, the nation, as a product of the capitalist era, is destined to disappear in the future. This is treated as an unquestionable truth, especially within the framework of an ideal socialist society. Consequently, in his view, the national question itself is merely temporary and transitory.
- 7) If the national question is understood as a transient phenomenon, one must ask: when is this issue expected to be resolved? For Stalin, the problems arising from national struggle will be definitively overcome only after the establishment of socialism.

Historical experience, however, suggests otherwise. Contemporary theorists of nationalism frequently interpret the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a consequence of national awakening rather than as a step toward strengthened socialism. Anthony D. Smith, for example, argues that the redrawing of borders during the collapse of the Soviet Union was driven largely by national aspirations (Smith, 2010). Whether one treats this factor as primary or supplementary is less important than the fact that national aspirations undeniably played a role in accelerating the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Thus, socialism does not resolve conflicts rooted in national aspirations, and the suppression of nationalism by a political regime alone proves to be merely a temporary effect.

- 8) On the surface, there appears to be nothing controversial in Stalin's definition. However, the features he lists may equally characterize a people or even a tribe. Thus, the central question, how the nation is distinguished from other forms of social organization, remains unanswered in Stalin's formulation (Davitashvili, 2003).
- 9) Stalin's 1913 definition of the nation was translated into practical Soviet policy through the ethno-federal system, where each ethnic group had its "own" territory, language, and economic unit. Claire P. Kaiser argues that this system created a hierarchy of "entitled nationhood" in which the titular ethnicity enjoyed special rights and privileges within its designated republic. In Georgia, this took a particularly complex form: on one hand, there was the official Stalin cult controlled from the center; on the other, a locally constructed Georgian cult (Kaiser, 2023).

Ronald Grigor Suny notes that under Stalin, Georgia became culturally more Georgian. By the early 1950s, more people spoke, read, and received education in the Georgian language than ever before. Georgian national culture was institutionalized through state-funded folk ensembles, Georgian-language films, and sanctioned literature; a complete network of primary, secondary, and higher education was established (Suny, 1994). In Suny's analysis, these developments reinforced an ethno-territorial mindset whose influence proved persistent even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The period from 1989 to 1991 was marked by the rise of ethno-nationalism in Georgia. According to Stephen Jones, Georgian nationalism underwent several configurations after independence: Zviad Gamsakhurdia's "exclusionary" nationalism was succeeded by Eduard Shevardnadze's "elite-led" nationalism, followed by Mikheil Saakashvili's "emotional but modernizing" nationalism (Gabritchidze, 2023). Jones situates Georgian Dream within this trajectory as one of those parties over the past thirty years that has pursued a privileged status for ethnic Georgians and pushed Georgian national culture to the forefront.

Accordingly, when examining the persistence of Stalin's definition of the nation in the Georgian context, it can be assumed that this persistence is intertwined with the legitimization of ethnocentric politics. The Soviet federal system, built on Stalin's objective criteria, created durable institutional and conceptual frameworks in which

the nation was understood as an exclusive, territorially bounded ethno-cultural category. Post-Soviet Georgia inherited not only these institutional structures but also an intellectual tradition shaped by decades of this ethno-territorial logic.

Nevertheless, several aspects highlight both the significance and the strengths of Stalin's definition. First, Stalin's effort to articulate concrete attributes of the nation, especially given that many theories of his time relied on vague descriptions or interpreted the nation primarily through an emotional lens. In contrast, Stalin introduced clear criteria - such as common language and economic cohesion - which provided a degree of conceptual precision. This feature, however, can also be viewed negatively, as such a rigid formulation created a framework for determining who could be recognized as a nation and who could not. Consequently, the justification of autonomy for some groups became easier under this model, while for others it remained unattainable.

Another strength lies in Stalin's insistence on understanding nations as historical formations emerging only under specific conditions. He does not treat nations as natural or primordial units. By emphasizing a shared economy as a defining element, Stalin effectively excludes pre-modern communities from the category of nations, thus offering a clearer analytical distinction.

Despite its historical influence within the Soviet intellectual tradition, Stalin's definition no longer meets contemporary analytical standards, especially those established in modern theories of nationalism. Outlined in the concept, a nation exists only when all four attributes are simultaneously present. Yet historical evidence shows that nations may form even when only some of these features are present. Moreover, Stalin's definition cannot account for diasporic national communities, which maintain strong national identities despite lacking a shared territory.

Conclusion

The analysis of Stalin's formulation of the nation and its comparison with modern theories of nationalism demonstrate that, although this definition represented an important intellectual framework in 1913, it no longer corresponds to the theoretical and analytical requirements through which the formation of national identity and the concept of the nation are understood today. Stalin's concept is based on the strict combination of four characteristics as the necessary preconditions for nation formation. However, historical and theoretical analysis show that these criteria are not universal and cannot adequately capture the diverse forms that national communities may take.

Stalin's model was influential from the moment of its publication and offered clear indicators that made it easier to classify whether a given community could be considered a nation. Nevertheless, this model portrays the nation as a stable and homogeneous phenomenon. Such an approach is more of a political instrument than an analytical category, reflecting party allegiance and fitting fully within the Marxist theoretical framework.

Contrary to the traditions of Western theories of nationalism, Stalin's definition does not consider the role of the state in the formation and development of the nation. The concept of the "state-nation" is entirely absent from his framework. One may debate the extent of the state's role in nation formation and nation-building, but it is difficult to discuss the national question today without acknowledging that the state does play a significant role. Because of these conceptual gaps, the applicability of Stalin's definition in contemporary nationalism studies is limited.

The analysis confirms the hypothesis: Stalin's notion did not endure because it offered a convincing explanation of what a nation is. Rather, it survived because it served a clear ideological purpose and was deeply embedded in the way Soviet intellectuals thought about the national question. For years, it was simply taken for granted - treated as an authoritative starting point rather than as a claim to be examined. What kept the definition alive was not its analytical strength, but its convenience as a ready-made framework that fit comfortably within Marxist doctrine. For this reason, the formulation should be regarded as a political and ideological construct rather than an analytical framework - one that tells us more about the ideological context in which it was produced.

In contemporary nationalism studies, its use is appropriate primarily as part of historical analysis, since explaining national identity as a discursively constructed and multilayered phenomenon extends beyond the boundaries of Stalin's conceptual model. Nevertheless, the definition remains a key component for understanding the intellectual traditions of the Soviet period.

Bibliography

- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
- Bauer, O. (2000). *The question of nationalities and social democracy*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Davitashvili, Z. (2003). *Nationalism and globalization*. Metsniereba.
- Gabritchidze, N. (2023, December 9). Nationalism and ideology in present-day Georgia: Interview with Prof. Stephen Jones. Civil.ge. <https://civil.ge/archives/573318>
- Gellner, E. (1983). *Nations and nationalism*. Cornell University Press.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. (1992). *Nations and nationalism since 1780: Programme, myth, reality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kaiser, C. P. (2023). *Georgian and Soviet: Entitled nationhood and the specter of Stalin in the Caucasus*. Cornell University Press.
- Koranashvili, G. (1997). *The national question: General-theoretical and specific-historical aspects*. Nike.

- Martin, T. (2001). *The affirmative action empire: Nations and nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*. Cornell University Press.
- Nikoleishvili, A. (2000). *The national question in Stalin's thought*. Kutaisi State University Press.
- Nimni, E. (Ed.). (2005). *National cultural autonomy and its contemporary critics*. Routledge.
- Smith, A. D. (2010). *Nationalism: Theory, ideology, history* (2nd ed.). Polity Press.
- Stalin, J. (2012). *Marxism and the national question*. CPGB-ML. https://archive.cpgb-ml.org/download/publications/stalin_marxism_and_national_question.pdf
- Suny, R. G. (1994). *The making of the Georgian nation*. Indiana University Press.