

Its power—and the power of those who speak it—derives from its special status as the only language used throughout the Soviet Union. Russian, as it had been during the previous empire, is the designated language for interpublic discourse.

Comrades born in the Russian republic never had to master a second language. Since the 19th century, Moscow has sent Russian administrators to live and work throughout its dominion. Along with their samovars, they carried their language. Most spoke no other regional language, so Russian crept into the local language scene from Estonia to Azerbaijan. (Of course, in the 19th century French was the language of the Russian elite.) Worker migrations from other republics reinforced the use of Russian as a common language. In some areas, Russian speakers came to outnumber the native population. Since the locals also knew some Russian, it became the lingua franca of local intercourse.

By reserving a special space for Russian in the years after the revolu-

tion, Soviet law in effect has spawned, over time, two separate and unequal networks for communication. The first network, based in the Russian Republic, had branch offices throughout the Soviet Union. The second, a babel of local languages, was restricted to the provinces. Before long, the first encroached on the second, little by little overwhelming it until, inexorably, Russian's de facto reign became de jure.

Practical considerations further ushered in a policy of language dominance. The Soviet Union needed specialists who could work in any region of the country. That meant Russian-speaking technocrats. By the late '70s, Russian was the official language of instruction in many disciplines in universities across the country.

At about the same time, and for similarly practical reasons, Russian was introduced in pre-schools across the country. The rationale was to help non-Russians compete in a Russian-dominated job market. Of course, no one—at least in Mos-

cow—thought Russians should have to learn a second language. After all, didn't everyone worth talking to speak Russian?

Now, *glasnost* and *perestroika* have eroded the social and economic underpinnings of the Russian language throne. Market decentralization, local planning and greater freedom of expression lessen the need for interpublic communication and favor the growth of local language networks. One after another, various republics have elevated their languages to official status. Some, like Moldavia, still allow workers from other republics to use Russian for official purposes; others, such as Estonia, require all immigrants to speak Estonian within four years after arriving.

Monolingual Russians are about to lose their privileges. And, in a futile attempt to halt the onslaught of linguistic nationalism, many have taken to the streets or have gone on strike to protest the militant new multilingualism now engulfing them.

—Hubert Devonish & Nan Elsasser

Colombia takes hit as coffee prices plunge

At the same time the Bush administration has pressured Colombia to devote more resources to fighting the cocaine barons, Washington has stood by and watched the collapse of the price of coffee, Bogota's leading legal export.

This latest show of U.S. indifference unfolded during the most recent meeting of the London-based International Coffee Organization (ICO). Since 1962 the ICO has periodically brought coffee producers and consumers together to establish minimum and maximum prices and to agree on quotas to support those prices.

The International Coffee Agreement, which the 74-nation ICO orchestrates, has never been trouble-free. But the downward spiral of coffee prices that followed the July 3 collapse of the accord was unprecedented. The 21 coffee-consuming nations and 50 coffee-producing countries were unable to agree on new quotas, and so the new accord contained none. The cartel deteriorated into a monitoring group that only tracked coffee sales.

Prices went into a free fall, plunging from nearly \$1.20 to 72 cents a pound, the lowest in real terms since the '30s. They have since recovered to about 80 cents a pound.

Bitter Colombians blame the collapse on the U.S. Bogota's chief negotiator, Nestor Osorio, told the *New York Times* that the U.S. was "very determined not to have an agreement."

Public reaction in Colombia, which depends on coffee for 30 percent of its export receipts, was vitriolic. *El Tiempo*, a mainstream Bogota daily, ran an editorial cartoon equating the reported hanging of Col. William Higgins in Lebanon to what the paper



viewed as U.S. scuttling of the pact. And in a letter to the editor, a reader asked why was it that Disneyland charged nearly twice as much for Coca-Cola as it did for coffee.

The 30 to 40 percent price plunge could cost the 50 producing countries \$4 billion annually, with Colombia losing some \$300 to \$400 million, says Milton Anderson, an economist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

After an initial refusal to work on rebuilding the pact, President George Bush agreed to help restore the accord following a personal plea from Colombian President Virgilio Barco.

Colombia is not the only country affected. Mexico's coffee revenues will likely drop by \$195 million, and Central America's earnings will decline by some \$713 million.

U.S. coffee importers have never liked the pact for the simple reason that it kept the price of coffee up. But they were especially angered by producers who sold excess coffee stocks for up to 40 percent below

market prices to non-ICO members, including Israel, South Africa, the Soviet Union and other East bloc countries. The business weekly *Barron's* estimated that non-cartel transactions accounted for between 15 and 20 percent of coffee exports.

While most exporting countries violated the agreement to some extent, Mexico, Kenya and some Central American countries whose production has increased but whose quotas had remained unchanged were responsible for most of the flagrantly discounted sales. Anderson says. Colombia and Brazil, the two leading exporters, generally adhered to the pact.

U.S. importers have also complained that the quotas did not include enough of the milder arabica bean, especially from Colombia. Central America and Mexico where the best arabica is grown.

The National Coffee Association, which represents U.S. importers, said that the pact should be scrapped. Prior to the collapse of the International Coffee Agreement, the association—which, according to its president, George Boecklin, provides "industry advisers to the U.S. government"—argued that "the coffee industry and coffee consumers would be best served by a free market."

Boecklin's group is not pleased by talk of reviving the agreement. "We're telling [the U.S. government] that the problems that existed in the old agreement have to be solved. We are not in favor of an agreement per se," he says.

Boecklin also rejects President Barco's argument that Washington should help strengthen the Colombian economy so it can better battle the cocaine barons. Barco points out that \$24.5 million in aid does not compare to the loss of \$300 million in coffee revenues or the gutting of an industry dominated by 500,000 small growers.

—Diane K. Bartz

ex-employee to address ... allegations of impropriety." CIA Director William Webster is among those who don't like Specter's proposal. The *New York Times's* Stephen Engelberg reports that Webster is "strongly opposed" to the idea of an independent inspector general and that the CIA "is mounting a determined drive to defeat" the proposal.

The war on druguerillas

The militarization of the war on drugs is raising justifiable concerns that the U.S.—now that it has established a beachhead in Honduras—has shifted its imperial sights south. Three months before President George Bush conjured up his drug war under the blaze of media spotlights, Michael Skol, an official at the State Department's Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, had some candid things to say about drug-war strategy. In a June 7 statement before the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, Skol said: "As we formulate national and international narcotics policies for the '90s, the U.S. government must work with its friends and allies in South America to develop creative new ways to attack the powerful criminal organizations, enriched by the narcotics trade, which seek to erase the values we all cherish ... we are requesting \$20 million [in military assistance to Colombia] in fiscal year '90. These funds will allow the Colombians to continue their aggressive pursuit of the traffickers and guerrillas. The administration's fiscal year '90 request for security assistance for Peru and Bolivia also are consistent with this approach. ... [M]ilitary forces can be useful in destroying labs and seizing drugs, [but] there are other reasons why militaries must get involved in the war against drugs. One is the narco-guerrilla connection." Skol goes on to say that the "narco-guerrilla connection" is strongest in Colombia, where the country's largest guerrilla movement, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), is bankrolled by the drug trade. This is nonsense. It has been repeatedly documented that the drug lords use their private armies as much to kill members of the leftist Patriotic Union Party as to protect the drug trade. (See *In These Times* February 8.) Continuing with his statement, Skol emphasizes again and again the threat posed by South American guerrilla movements. "Another reason for more military involvement is that it is needed to provide security against guerrillas while the police carry out law enforcement functions. ... If the militaries are not able to reduce the guerrilla threat to a certain level and are unable to come to the assistance of police units which encounter guerrillas, the police could be reduced to never leaving their stations. ... [D]rugs are a transnational problem that requires international cooperation at an unprecedented level," he said. Of course, a war against South America's guerrilla movements is harder to sell to the American people than a war against drugs. Apparently the administration realizes this. In his September 5 declaration of war against drugs, the president didn't mention guerrillas once, but he did say, "Our strategy allocates more than a quarter of a billion dollars for next year in military and law enforcement assistance for the three Andean nations of Colombia, Bolivia and Peru."

Senator North

Is Lt. Col. Oliver North considering a run for a Virginia Senate seat? Richard Delgado, president of the conservative Legal Affairs Council (LAC), wants North in Congress. He told *Washington Times* reporter Valerie Richardson, "There was a discussion at yesterday's [September 23] meeting of the Legal Affairs Council about starting a draft Oliver North for the U.S. Senate [campaign.]" The LAC raised about \$300,000 to help pay North's legal fees. When asked by the *Washington Times* if he has his eye on the Senate, North said only, "I don't rule anything out." But out on the stump North gives the appearance that he is running for something. At a recent "Family Salute to Oliver North" picnic for 500 in Chantilly, Vir., North spoke about "pro-family values" and tuition tax credits. And he told his supporters to beware the Democrats' "liberal hot tub," for it contains "every anti-life, anti-business, pro-big government goosey-touchy-feely group you can think of."

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By Salim Muwakkil

Blacks call for reparations to break shackles of the past

EARLY NEXT YEAR REP. JOHN CONYERS (D-MI) will introduce legislation authorizing a study to determine the damage done to African-Americans by 250 years of slavery and the subsequent deprivations of Jim Crow, and to recommend remedies. Widely dubbed the "reparations bill," the legislation will make official the growing consensus among black leadership—spurred in part by the Supreme Court's flight from racial justice—that issues of U.S. racism must be framed in a broader historical context.

Conyers' draft legislation makes no specific demands for reparations; instead it urges the U.S. to openly acknowledge slavery's evil and to form an interracial commission to examine its legacy. The bill was inspired by the August 1988 law awarding \$20,000 in reparations to each of the surviving Japanese-Americans imprisoned in concentration camps during World War II. That legislation was legitimized by a federal study that determined how the internment damaged those Japanese-Americans affected.

"We want a congressional commission to gather material together about the most brutal and fundamental injustice in our nation's history," Conyers explains. "We want to calmly assess the impact of slavery—not only on African-Americans as a people but on us as a nation—and make recommendations to the federal government about what appropriate remedies should be taken."

The Nation of Islam, the Republic of New Africa and other more extreme elements of the black movement have long demanded reparations for slavery—usually in the form of land—but in recent years the idea has caught on among a wider range of leadership. Jesse Jackson, for example, has been in the forefront of current discussion of the issue, and several church-based groups have also endorsed the concept. While these newer claims are less grandiose than the demands of the radicals, they share the same logic: the damage done to African-Americans must be systematically repaired.

William Owens, a Massachusetts state senator, introduced a bill last December that would form a commission to negotiate reparations payments by the commonwealth to "people of African descent." In April of this year, Detroit's city council unanimously passed legislation urging Congress to create a \$40 billion reparations program that would fund college scholarships and other education for all African-American students.

The reparations issue is raised at virtually every gathering of black activists these days. At last April's African-American Summit, the concluding document included this passage: "We call for reparations. If they are good enough for the Japanese-Americans and Native Americans, they are good for those of us who worked for hundreds of years unpaid, and who now need that capital ... for our own development in this country."

Perilous freedom: Although the demand for reparations has acquired a radical tinge, the idea is nothing new. During the Reconstruction era, Congress heatedly debated but ultimately defeated the proposal to award freed slaves "40 acres and a mule." Even ardent segregationists understood the cruel injustice of setting slaves free without the means to survive. Freedom was a perilous thing for those former slaves who had been



Rep. John Conyers (D-MI) is calling for a study to examine slavery's legacy.

prohibited from learning to read or otherwise acquainting themselves with the customs and culture of the people who once enslaved and still despised them.

"The amazing thing is that we survived at all," says Maulana Karenga, director of the Institute of Pan-African Studies in Los Angeles and a longtime reparations advocate. "We can find no other people in history

would listen."

Not many listened to Jenkins in those days; his determined, almost monomaniacal commitment to the reparations idea led some to cast him as a bit of a crank, and he seldom was taken seriously. Even though he literally wrote the reparations bill that recently passed in Detroit, many still regard him as a rather eccentric advocate.

"He may not be well versed in the art of public relations and he lacks a certain amount of media eloquence, but his determination will soon force the entire nation to deal with his issue," notes Michael Wimberly, a reporter for the black-owned *Michigan Chronicle*, who has followed the reparations issue from Jenkins' desk to the congressional docket. Conyers' draft legislation bears little resemblance to Jenkins' bill, but most observers trace the 13-term congressman's leadership on the issue to the persistent urgings of his dogged lieutenant.

When the issue was first raised last year, following the vote on Japanese-American reparations, Rep. Mervyn Dymally (D-CA) was identified as the probable point man. It was generally assumed that since he co-sponsored the legislation authorizing Japanese-Americans reparations, he would be a natural to spearhead similar action on behalf of African-Americans.

"At first, because of the response of black citizens to the Japanese-American reparations bill, several members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), including Dymally, expressed an interest in drafting some sort of position paper on similar legislation for African-Americans," says Amelia Parker, head of the CBC's Washington office. Blacks had generally supported the bill but were distressed that the CBC failed to push for action on reparations for slavery. "There was no coordination of these attempts, so we had to decide to let one member take the lead and develop legislation that all the other members could support," Parker said.

Savvy constituents: Since Conyers' constituents had demonstrated such a level of expertise on the issue, the Detroit legislator

was selected to lead the way. The African-American Reparations Committee, a Detroit-based group headed by Cindy Owens—the wife of the state senator who introduced the Massachusetts bill—and including Jenkins and many other interested parties, provided the congressman with invaluable assistance.

"Members of the reparations committee are extremely knowledgeable about the issue, and they have directed us to the proper research materials that would help make our case," explains Jamila Shabazz, a Conyers aide. "Some have specific expertise in preparing legislation, so their assistance in that area has also been helpful. They are a tremendous community resource."

In the face of legislation granting reparations to Japanese-Americans, and various treaties (although frequently broken) with Native American nations, the legitimacy of compensation for slavery—certainly this country's ugliest moral stain—seems unsailable. The social dislocations that so plague the urban underclass seem clearly to stem from the monumental deprivations of the slave experience.

But critics of reparations for black Americans argue that these descendants of slaves are—for reasons mostly technical—less deserving than those other groups. What's more, they add, any attempt to award such reparations would result in a logistical and political nightmare. For instance, would the descendants of free blacks be eligible? What about the descendants of blacks from other areas of the world? How would these differences be distinguished?

"Neither the victims nor the perpetrators of the injustice are living," wrote David Ellen in a recent *New Republic* article on the issue. "This sharply distinguishes black reparations both from the Wartime Relocation Act (involving Japanese-American reparations) and from the reparations West Germany still pays Israel and concentration camp survivors."

And because "the government did not commit or compel slavery; it merely allowed it," Ellen wrote, the government should not be liable for reparations. Beyond these technical objections—which Conyers dismisses as irrelevant—Ellen noted that the very idea of reparations "reinforces the feeling of victimization that has been so counterproductive to black progress."

Ellen has apparently concluded that "feelings of victimization" are more harmful to black progress than were three and a half centuries of actual victimization under chattel slavery and legally institutionalized racism. Such skewed reasoning often infects the arguments of those so intent on maintaining the scope of slavery's malevolence they somehow wind up blaming the victims.

Ellen further contended that arguments for reparations are divisive because they are "almost custom-made to fuel racial resentment on the part of whites." He noted nothing of blacks' resentment about how this country's racist past set the stage for the deteriorating conditions of the present and the depressing portents of the future.

"I find it absolutely incredible that we're just beginning to rationally discuss the impact of that inhumane institution that has cast such a large and malicious shadow over our entire history," Conyers says. But our present racial impasse cannot be understood, he believes, until we take a serious and unflinching look into our racist past. □

BLACK AMERICA

who were subjected to more sustained and systematic cruelty."

Conyers contends that the legacy of that brutal history remains all around us. "We see that legacy in every major American city with Third World statistics in infant mortality, health and employment," he says. "When we are entertained in the media by the sight of so many young black men with their heads down during drug busts, we see it."

Why the sudden popularity of a notion once considered too radical for most blacks to contemplate? "I think that black people just finally woke up to see what was really happening," says Ray Jenkins, a longtime Detroit activist credited as the prime mover behind Conyers' bill.

Other observers say the Supreme Court's recent rulings against affirmative action spurred this new direction. "With the backward direction of the top court, many of us now realize that we need a broader historical context from which to argue our case for affirmative action," says Craig Ford, a Chicago-based civil rights attorney. "Crafting arguments for reparations presents that broader context."

Jenkins says his interest in the subject was sparked in 1967 when he read of a treaty agreement between the U.S. and Sioux Indians. "Then I started researching what the Aborigines received in Australia, the Jews in Israel, and even what the Chippewa Indians of Michigan received. I couldn't understand why black Americans, who had been treated worse than all of them, received nothing. I complained to just about everyone who