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What Do We Say About The National Question?

Paul D'Amato, author of "The Meaning of Marxism," explains how the Russian revolutionary Lenin approached the question of imperialism and national liberation.

ONE OF the least appreciated of the contributions of the Russian Marxist Vladimir Lenin was his writings and polemics (and most of what Lenin wrote was a polemic) on the question of national oppression.

The issue was particularly important for Russian socialists in the early 20th century. The empire of Russia's Tsar oppressed a number of smaller nations within its vast borders. Fully 57 percent of those living in Russia were, in Lenin's words, "subject peoples"—Ukrainians, Poles, Finns, Georgians and so on.

The significance of the national question for the socialist movement worldwide was underscored in this era by the growth of modern imperialism and colonialism—the carve-up of the globe into "spheres of influence" and colonial possessions by the "great powers" Britain and France, and secondarily, Germany, the U.S. and Belgium. The great power rivalries culminated in the outbreak of the First World War.

The other side of the question was represented by the awakening of national movements of oppressed people in the Balkans, Asia and elsewhere.

For Lenin, the national question was inextricably tied up with the question of international class solidarity—how to build a worldwide socialist movement free of national chauvinism, prejudices and mistrust. "The interests of the working class and of its struggle against capitalism demand complete solidarity and the closest unity of the workers of all nations," Lenin wrote.

The question, however, was: How was this unity to be achieved?

THERE WERE those on the left—the Polish Marxist Rosa Luxemburg, for example, and the Russian socialist Nikolai Bukharin—who argued that in the name of combating nationalism, socialists must oppose all national aspirations, including the right of nations oppressed by the great powers, to self-determination. To Luxemburg and Bukharin, self-determination, in conditions of capitalist economic interdependence and imperialism, was a utopian pipedream.

To this latter point, Lenin noted, first of all, that political independence—the formation of an independent state—should not be confused with economic independence, which naturally was impossible in conditions of modern imperialism.

Second, he noted, since when did socialists gear their demands based on what was "realistic" or "practical" in regards to what was immediately achievable? Thirdly, he argued, "If, in our political agitation, we fail to advance and advocate the slogan of the right to secession, we shall play into the hands, not only of the bourgeoisie, but also of the feudal landlords and the absolutism of the oppressor nation."

Lenin understood that real international working-class unity could not be built merely by proclaiming it. Because the oppression of small or weaker nations by larger or stronger ones is a reality, the division of workers by nation, their mutual national mistrust, and the national and chauvinism that binds them to their own ruling classes' interests cannot be overcome merely by calling for international solidarity.

In order for there to be not the slightest mistrust between workers of oppressed and oppressor nations, Lenin argued, socialists must stand for the complete equality of nations, and against any national privileges of one nation over another. One cannot support the full equality of nations unless one vigorously supports the right of oppressed nations to self-determination—that

is, their right to secede from the imperial power that oppresses them.

Naturally, within the limits of capitalism, this is an "impractical" demand, and one that clearly can't be completely fulfilled so long as capitalist relations continue. The point is that advancing this democratic slogan is an important means by which socialists strengthen and advance the unity of the international working class, upon which the struggle against capitalism depended.

Lenin sometimes used the example of the right to divorce to explain his argument about the national question. Supporting the right of divorce was not the same as advocating that all married couples should divorce.

In no case, however, would it be possible for socialists to oppose the right of women to divorce. Without this right, there could be no possibility of a marriage based on equality. Likewise, the freedom for nations to unite on the basis of equality implies, necessarily, their freedom to secede, to separate.

ON WHAT did Lenin base this position? He argued that capitalism had two contradictory tendencies: One toward the "awakening of national life and national movements, the struggle against all national oppression, and the creation of national states," and the other, with the creation of a world market, toward "the development and growing frequency of international intercourse" and the breakdown of national barriers.

Imperialism—the struggle among the leading world powers for mastery over the world system—is a product of both these factors. Hence, a central feature of the era of imperialism is the dominance of small states by bigger, more powerful states—of oppressed nations by oppressor nations.

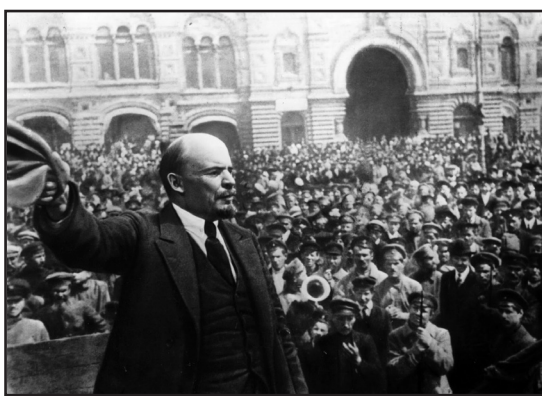
Lenin emphasized that socialists should support the growing assimilation of peoples and cultures and the breaking down of national barriers—to make it easier to foster solidarity among workers of all countries. This was the positive aspect of global capitalist development.

In this regard, Marxists support, other things being equal, the amalgamation of nations and peoples and oppose all forms of nationalism insofar as it put forward that workers of one nation should share a closer allegiance to "their own" nation than to workers of other nations. As Lenin wrote in 1913:

Whoever does not recognize and champion the equality of nations and languages and does not fight against all national oppression or inequality is not a Marxist; he is not even a democrat. That is beyond doubt. But it is also beyond doubt that the pseudo-Marxist who heaps abuse upon a Marxist of another nation for being an "assimilator" is simply a nationalist philistine.

Lenin opposed "the segregation of the workers of one nation from those of another" through, for example, the creation of separate schools for different nationalities—or the creation of separate socialist parties among Russian workers based on their national affiliation.

On the other hand, one cannot even begin to talk about uniting workers across national boundaries without championing the rights of oppressed nations. The formation of national states under capitalism involved



not only voluntary unity, but also forced unity. Socialists can therefore only support assimilation and working class unity based on the fullest equality of national and linguistic rights. As Lenin wrote in early 1916:

The proletariat cannot but fight against the forcible retention of the oppressed nations within the boundaries of a given state, and this is exactly what the

struggle for the right of self-determination means. The proletariat must demand the right of political secession for the colonies and for the nations that "its own" nation oppresses. Unless it does this, proletarian internationalism will remain a meaningless phrase; mutual confidence and class solidarity between the workers of the oppressing and oppressed nations will be impossible.

LENIN'S INSISTENCE on supporting the right of oppressed nations to self-determination isn't the same as extending support to a nationalist ideology in any form. Lenin believed the nationalism of the oppressed had a progressive content, but past a certain point, it stood counter to working-class internationalism:

Insofar as the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation fights the oppressor, we are always, in every case, and more strongly than anyone else, in favor, for we are the staunchest and the most consistent enemies of oppression. But insofar as the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation stands for its own bourgeois nationalism, we stand against. We fight against the privileges and violence of the oppressor nation, and do not in any way condone strivings for privileges on the part of the oppressed nation.

What this meant in practical terms was that the tasks of socialists in an oppressor nation and an oppressed nation were not the same regarding the national question.

The socialists of the oppressed nation must have a policy independent of the nationalist bourgeoisie, so as not to be taken in tow by efforts to use "the slogans of national liberation to deceive the workers," as Lenin wrote—that is, to use these slogans "for reactionary agreements with the bourgeoisie of the dominant nation (for example, the Poles in Austria and Russia who come to terms with reactionaries for the oppression of Jews and Ukrainians.)"

Indeed, bourgeois nationalists, while calling for independence, were often willing to make deals with other imperialist powers in order to gain advantages for their own aims.

So Lenin's position was not nationalist in the sense of positively offering support to a nationalist ideology. It was internationalist—based on the understanding that international working-class unity would be a dead letter if workers of the oppressor nation did not extend their full support for the right to self-determination.

Lenin noted that in Russia, only the "Great-Russians" had the privilege of having their own national state. Great Russian workers, Lenin argued, must not defend this privilege. They must fight for the unity of all workers living in this state. However, he noted:

we cannot move towards that goal unless we... uphold the equality of the various nations. Whether the Ukraine, for example, is destined to form an independent state is a matter that will be determined by a thousand unpredictable factors. Without attempting idle 'guesses,' we firmly uphold...the right of the Ukraine to form such a state. We respect this right; we do not uphold the privileges of Great Russians with regard to Ukrainians; we educate the masses in the spirit of recognition of that right, in the spirit of rejecting state privileges for any nation."

At the same time, Lenin was also clear that the duty of socialists in the oppressed nation was to maintain their independence from bourgeois nationalism—to link the fight against national oppression with the struggle for workers' power, and to build unity with workers in the oppressor nation.

THIS IS the way Lenin outlined the general approach. But he was careful to note that every case must be analyzed in the concrete. This was particularly important in relation to imperialist rivalries.

For example, while he unconditionally supported Serbia's right to self-determination in relation to the Hapsburg Empire (Austria), Lenin recognized that with the outbreak of the world war, Serbia's national aspirations had become subordinated to the interests of competing great powers.

"If this war were an isolated one," he wrote, "if it were not connected with the general European war, with the selfish and predatory aims of Britain, Russia, etc., it would have been the duty of all socialists" to support

Serbia's struggle for independence.

However, with the outbreak of the world war, he wrote, "The national element in the Serbo-Austrian war is not, and cannot be, of any serious significance in the general European war." Serbian arms were transformed into an adjunct to the interests of one of the two imperialist camps.

But this didn't detract from Lenin's argument that, as an oppressed nation, Serbia had the right to independence:

The fact that the struggle for national liberation against one imperialist power may, under certain circumstances, be utilized by another "Great" Power in its equally imperialist interests should have no more weight in inducing Social Democracy to renounce its recognition of the right of nations to self-determination than the numerous case of the bourgeoisie utilizing republican slogans for the purpose of political deception and financial robbery, for example, in the Latin countries, have had in inducing them to renounce republicanism.

Though conditions vary and Marxists must always approach each question concretely, what is useful in Lenin's writings is his method in approaching the question. What, for socialists, will foster the greatest unity and solidarity between workers of different nations?

Revolutionaries must break down national chauvinism among workers in the oppressor nation, while also building a working-class movement in the oppressed nation that is independent of the nationalist bourgeoisie and middle classes who wish to suppress the interests of the working class under the cloak of national unity and national culture.

LENIN'S WRITINGS on the national question are not purely of historic interest, of course.

It is clear that nationalism—in the form of the oppression of weaker states by more powerful ones, of national rivalries and chauvinism, and of national movements—is still very much with us.

One need only think of the status of nations and national groups on the borders of the Russian empire since the collapse of the USSR, of Tibet and the Uighurs in China, of the national rivalries in the Balkans since the collapse of ex-Yugoslavia, of the inter-ethnic violence in Africa, or of the U.S. occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan—not to mention U.S. support for coups, both successful and not, in Haiti, Honduras and Venezuela, as well as its support for Israel.

And, of course, with the conflict over Ukraine, one can also see how the national question is complicated by the intervention of rival imperialist powers—the U.S. versus Russia.

In the U.S., the emphasis of our argument is naturally on opposing U.S. intervention in Ukraine. But that should not blind us to Ukraine's historic oppression by Russia and its right to self-determination.

There are some on the left who argue that support for Ukraine's self-determination must be cast aside because there are fascists in its government. But making Ukraine's right to independence conditional on the composition of the government is similar to those in the U.S. who failed to defend Iraq's right to self-determination against invasion by the U.S. because of the brutal character of Saddam Hussein's regime.

The position one takes on Ukraine does depend on where one lives. Socialists in Ukraine must oppose reactionary nationalism in their own country—including a government that is pushing through restrictions on language, threatening the rights of non-Ukraine minorities, cooperating with openly fascist forces and making deals with Western imperialism.

Socialists in Russia, on the other hand, are duty-bound to emphasize Ukraine's right to be independent from Russian interference, including military intervention, manipulation of elections and so on. Without this, they can never hope to build relations of mutual trust and solidarities with workers in Ukraine, nor effectively challenge the far right in their own country or anywhere else.

It is not the job of revolutionaries to choose sides in an inter-imperialist rivalry. Though the main emphasis for any revolutionary living within a great power—especially the "greatest" power of all, the U.S.—should be to oppose the nationalism and chauvinistic patriotism in one's "own" country, that doesn't require throwing one's support behind another "great" power, with whom it is in competition and conflict.

The greater imperialist reach of the U.S. and the necessity of opposing it with all our might does not require us to sow illusions in the equally reactionary and oppressive aims of the Russian empire of Vladimir Putin—including its attempts to weaken the sovereignty of Ukraine for reasons that have nothing to do with resisting "fascism" or fulfilling the will of the people of Crimea.

Putin's claims about Ukraine are no more legitimate and genuine than Washington's insistence that the U.S. invasion of Iraq was about combatting a "new Hitler" or that its invasion of Afghanistan was about freeing women from oppression.

Read more about our struggle for a better world on page 6.

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