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INTRODUCTION

By Doug Lorimer

Among Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's most outstanding contributions to the theory and practice of Marxism are his writings on nationalism and the national question. Assembled in this volume are a comprehensive selection, presented in chronological order, of Lenin's writings on this subject covering the period from the preparations for the second congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party in 1903 (at which Bolshevism emerged as a "current of political thought and as a political party"¹) to the formation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in December 1922. Included as an appendix is Joseph Stalin's 1914 pamphlet *Marxism and the National Question* — originally published in 1913 as a series of articles in the Bolshevik magazine *Prosveshcheniye* (Enlightenment) under the title "The National Question and Self-Determination" — which Lenin described in December 1913 as providing the theoretical "fundamentals of a national program for Social-Democracy".²

That Lenin dealt extensively with this subject is not surprising — in the "prison-house of nations" that was tsarist Russia, the unification of the workers of different nationalities against the autocratic tsarist state and the capitalist class, which sought to divide the workers along national lines, was at the forefront of the problems facing the revolutionary Marxists. Only a single, multinational, democratically centralised Marxist revolutionary party, Lenin argued, could provide effective leadership to the multinational working class of Russia in the struggle to overthrow the tsarist autocracy and capitalism. It was, of course, just such a party which succeeded in leading the workers and peasants of Russia to victory in the October 1917 Revolution. But in order to build and maintain this party, Lenin had to repeatedly wage a polemical struggle against nationalist tendencies within the socialist movement itself — beginning in 1903 with his rejection of the organisational federalism and pro-Zionist separatism advocated by the Jewish Workers League (Bund) of Lithuania, Poland and

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Russia and ending with his 1922 criticism of the growing accommodation of a section of the ruling Bolshevik party headed by Stalin to the nationalist outlook and policy toward the non-Russians within the newly formed Soviet Union of "that really Russian man, the Great-Russian chauvinist, in substance a rascal and a tyrant, such as the typical Russian bureaucrat is".³

The international unity of the working class in the struggle for democracy and socialism was the point of departure and the guiding line that runs through all of Lenin's writings on the national question. As early as 1903 he noted that it was the task of socialists to "rally the greatest possible *masses* of workers of each and every nationality *more closely*, to rally them for struggle *in the broadest possible arena* for a democratic republic and for socialism".⁴ As a corollary of this approach, Lenin argued that socialists had to "resolutely oppose nationalism in all its forms", both the "reactionary nationalism" of the tsarist ruling circles and the "refined and disguised nationalism of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties".⁵

Tsarist nationalism expressed the outlook and policy of the semi-capitalist, semi-feudal ruling caste of officials who were drawn from the semi-feudal ruling class of big landowners. This form of nationalism strove to safeguard the privileges of the dominant Russian nation at the expense of all the other nations (which together constituted 57% of the population living under tsarist rule), condemning them "to an inferior status, with fewer rights, or even no rights at all". "Not a single Marxist, and not even a single democrat", Lenin argued, "can treat this nationalism with anything else but the utmost hostility."⁶

While the Russian and non-Russian bourgeois-democratic nationalists, Lenin pointed out, advocated equal rights for all nations "in deeds they (often covertly, behind the backs of the people) stand for certain privileges for one nation, and always try to secure greater advantages for 'their own' nation (i.e., for the bourgeoisie of their own nation); they strive to separate and segregate nations, to foster national exclusiveness, etc. By talking most of all about 'national culture' and emphasising what separates one nation from another, bourgeois nationalists *divide the workers* of the various nations".

"The class-conscious workers", Lenin argued in the same article, "combat *all* national oppression and *all* national privileges, but they do not confine themselves to that. They combat all, even the most refined nationalism, and advocate not only the unity, but also the *amalgamation* of the workers of all nationalities in the struggle against reaction and against bourgeois nationalism in all its forms. Our task is not to segregate nations, but to unite the workers of all nations."⁷

In advocating that they oppose all forms of nationalism, Lenin was therefore not saying that class-conscious workers should ignore national consciousness, national identity — the recognition of being a member of a particular national community and its relationship to other nations. To the contrary, in order to achieve proletarian class solidarity and the complete organisational amalgamation among workers of different nations living under the rule of a single state, Marxists had to champion the fullest possible equality in the relations between these nations, including the right of each nation to self-determination, to politically separate itself from other nations and constitute itself as a fully sovereign nation-state. At the same time, Marxists had to support "everything that helps to obliterate national distinctions and remove national barriers ... everything that makes the ties between nationalities closer and closer, or tends to merge nations".⁸

These two, seemingly contradictory, sides of Lenin's Marxist policy on the national question — defence of the right of each nation to determine its own destiny and the fullest possible equality between nations on the one hand, and, on the other, complete opposition to all forms of nationalism, to the bourgeois outlook and policy of segregating nations and support for everything that tends to remove national distinctions and to merge nations together — flowed from his recognition of the dialectical character of the historical process that gives rise to the national question.

Nations, as a particular objective form of human community, first came into existence with the emergence of capitalist relations of commodity production in feudal Europe, which required the amalgamation and merging of economically isolated and smaller feudal communities. But the growing economic interdependence which led to the emergence of nations and nation-states did not stop at national boundaries. The development of capitalism led to growing economic interdependence between nations, to the emergence of an interdependent worldwide economy and to breaking down of national distinctions and the beginning of the merging or assimilation of nations. In his 1913 article "Critical Remarks on the National Question" Lenin observed:

Developing capitalism knows two historical tendencies in the national question. The first is the awakening of national life and national movements, the struggle against all national oppression and the creation of national states. The second is the development and the growing frequency of international intercourse in every form, the breakdown of national barriers, the creation of the international unity of capital, of economic life in general, of politics, science, etc.

Both tendencies are a universal law of capitalism. The former predominates in the beginning of its development, the latter characterises a mature capitalism that is moving

towards its transformation into socialist society.⁹

Lenin went on to ask: "Is there anything real left in the concept of assimilation, after all violence and all inequality [between nations] have been eliminated?" And he replies: "Yes, there undoubtedly is. What is left is capitalism's world-historical tendency to break down national barriers, obliterate national distinctions, and to *assimilate* nations — a tendency which manifests itself with every passing decade, and is one of the greatest driving forces for transforming capitalism into socialism."¹⁰

Note that Lenin speaks of a "world-historical tendency" to "assimilate nations", and that he views this tendency not as coming into operation *after* the ending of national oppression but as existing *simultaneously* with the opposing tendency, that expressed in the "awakening of national life and national movements, the struggle against all national oppression and the creation of national states". He treats the two opposing tendencies as a dialectical unity of opposites and the contradiction between them as the motive force of the historical process of the development of nations.

For capitalism, the two tendencies present an insoluble contradiction, since capitalism is based on the exploitation of an increasingly socialised — i.e., *internationally interdependent* — productive process and productive forces for the private profit of capitalist owners who are increasingly concentrated within the monopolistic economic associations (corporations) of one or a few nations. The more capitalism develops the international interdependence of nations, the more pronounced does the tendency become to divide the world into a handful of privileged nations (characterised by a mature capitalism that is moving toward its transformation into socialism) and a large and growing number of oppressed and capitalistically underdeveloped nations.

As a consequence of this division, "an abstract presentation of the question of nationalism in general is of no use at all", Lenin argued. "A distinction must necessarily be made between the nationalism of an oppressor nation and that of an oppressed nation"¹¹, to wit, Marxists must resolutely oppose the first kind of nationalism since, either overtly or covertly, it defends the privileges of the oppressor nation; the second kind of nationalism, however, "has a general democratic content that is directed *against* [national] oppression and it is this content that we *unconditionally* support".¹² Again, in his 1913 article "Critical Remarks on the National Question", Lenin explained that such an approach was not in contradiction to the Marxist policy of opposing every form of nationalism:

The principle of nationality is historically inevitable in bourgeois society and, taking this society into due account, the Marxist fully recognises the historical legitimacy

of national [liberation] movements. But to prevent this recognition from becoming an apologia of nationalism, it must be strictly limited to what is progressive in such movements, in order that this recognition may not lead to bourgeois ideology obscuring proletarian consciousness.

The awakening of the masses from feudal lethargy, and their struggle against national oppression, for the sovereignty of the people, of the nation, are progressive. Hence, it is the Marxist's *bounden* duty to stand for the most resolute and consistent democratism on all aspects of the national question. This task is largely a negative one. But this is the limit the proletariat can go in supporting nationalism, for beyond that begins the "positive" activity of the *bourgeoisie* to *fortify* nationalism.

To throw off the feudal yoke, all national oppression and all privileges enjoyed by any particular nation or language, is the imperative duty of the proletariat as a democratic force, and is certainly in the interests of proletarian class struggle, which is obscured and retarded by bickering on the national question. But to go *beyond* these strictly limited and definite historical limits in helping bourgeois nationalism means betraying the proletariat and siding with the *bourgeoisie*.¹³

For Lenin the struggle against national oppression, though absolutely essential to the task of uniting the workers of different nationalities in the struggle against their capitalist rulers, was never one for the perpetuation of national distinctions; its goal was rather to pave the way for the voluntary political union of nations as equals within a multinational, workers' and peasants' democratic republic, the framework for their free merger and assimilation into a new form of human community — the *supranational*, worldwide community characteristic of the future socialist society. ■