

# The Bolsheviks and the National Question: uniting theory and practice, 1913-1923

Sat, 30/04/1994 - 10:59

The Bolshevik programme for the national question was developed out of a critique of the experience of the Second International in the years up to and including the First World War. It was a revolutionary policy hammered out in response to a new period of capitalist development ushered in by imperialism. Dave Stockton looks at the debates within Russian social-democracy up to the Russian revolution of 1917 and examines the policy of the Bolsheviks at the head of a young Soviet State trying to resolve the problem of national oppression within the former Tsarist empire. The contrast with Stalin's later actions in respect of non-Russian minorities is thereby all the more obvious.

?Whatever may be the further destiny of the Soviet Union?and it is still far from a quiet haven?the national policy of Lenin will find its place among the eternal treasures of mankind.?1

When Leon Trotsky wrote these words he was looking back over two decades in which Lenin developed, defended and modified the Marxist position on the national question. His high estimation of Lenin's contribution was accentuated by the process of bureaucratic degeneration which the young workers' state had undergone after Lenin's death.2

In the brief period, from late 1913 to the outbreak of war, Lenin paid a great deal of attention to the national question. From 1915-1917 he engaged in a struggle within the Bolshevik party and with the groups of revolutionary internationalists that stood closest to it.

For a whole period Lenin seemed to be losing the battle as one prominent Bolshevik after another?Shaumyan, Dzerzhinsky, Lunacharsky?came out against the right of nations to self-determination.

In the years 1917-1919 the struggle entered a new stage as the ruling Bolsheviks sought to rally the non-Great Russian populations of the embattled workers' state to the side of the victorious soviets.

In the face of failed workers' uprisings, seceding bourgeois regimes, and even in the presence of underdeveloped national movements, Lenin fought for the unconditional right of self-determination for those nationalities and peoples oppressed by Tsarism and Great Russian chauvinism. This was always advanced as a way of hastening the class differentiation within the various nationalities.

Lenin and Trotsky's policy sharply contrasted with that of Stalin. During the Civil War Stalin had little patience with national grievances. In the areas formerly subject to Tsarist Russia's oppression Stalin sought military and bureaucratic solutions to the overthrow of the national bourgeoisies. In place of the action of the working people themselves, he transformed military expediency into wilful indifference to the fears and suspicions of the former oppressed peoples. This was then to turn into outright national oppression when Stalin had absolute power?a policy that was to reap its revenge with the break up of the USSR fifty years later.

In the pre-war years Lenin's elaboration of the Bolshevik policy on nationalities entangled him in sharp arguments with his closest collaborators. Nikolai Bukharin (1888-1938) was the brightest and most original theoretician in the Bolshevik ranks, after Lenin, in the period around the outbreak of the first world war. He was the only Bolshevik to directly influence and indeed change Lenin's views on major theoretical questions on imperialism and the question of the state.

The debate over the nature of the new epoch was to prove important for the development of a programme to respond to the national question. There were clear differences between the theory of imperialism which Lenin developed, and that of Bukharin. In particular, Bukharin stressed the fusion of trusts, within each developed capitalist nation, into a state capitalism, the suppression of competition, at this level and its transposition to the world scale.

For Bukharin, there was 'a very strong tendency towards transforming the entire national economy into one gigantic combined enterprise under the tutelage of the financial kings and the capitalist state'.<sup>3</sup> Competition at the level of world economy necessarily became politicised and militarised. Here the 'New Leviathans', the 'imperialist robber states,' clashed with one another to achieve world dominance.

Lenin tended to stress the continuing uneven and multi-layered nature of capitalism. Imperialism, with its dominance of finance capital, its cartels and trusts, its intimate interconnections with the state, did not obliterate all previous forms of capital. Also its tendency to seize and plunder the weaker and less developed countries did not abolish the national question. Rather, it raised it to a new role, resistance not to pre-capitalist, feudal forms but to capitalism in its highest stage. The result of Bukharin's emphasis, in contrast, was that the general democratic and the specifically 'national' programmes of revolutionary social democracy had become increasingly utopian.

Bukharin was the leading figure of a group of young Bolshevik intellectuals who became known as the Baugy group, from their place of exile, near Lausanne in Switzerland. They developed disagreements with Lenin, on the breadth of the internationalist current, on the slogans for opposing the war and on the role of minimum demands, especially the right of nations to self-determination.

The arrival from Russia of Yurii Pyatakov, and Evgenia Bosch, who immediately reinforced the Baugy group, had the effect of sharpening the dispute over the national question. Pyatakov and Bosch were convinced advocates of Rosa Luxemburg's positions on the national question.

The Baugy group was also in agreement with Karl Radek, the chief spokesman of a group of Polish and German internationalists who, with Lenin, formed part of the Zimmerwald Left but who supported Rosa Luxemburg's opposition to the self-determination slogan.<sup>4</sup>

Bukharin, inclined to draw one sided and abstract conclusions from his own theory of imperialism, abandoned the support of the right of nations to self determination which he had defended in 1913. Indeed, he went further and began to question the use of the entire minimum programme. In his new thinking this had to be totally subordinated to the struggle for socialism. Effectively, he moved over to Radek's Luxemburgist position. This can be seen in the theses he wrote in November 1915:

'The slogan 'self-determination of nations' is first of all utopian, as it cannot be realised within the framework of capitalism. It is also harmful as it is a slogan that sows illusions . . . In no case and under no circumstances do we support the government of a great power that represses the insurrection or rebellion of an oppressed nation. At the same time we do not mobilise proletarian forces under the slogan of the 'right of nations to self-determination'. Our task in this case is to mobilise the forces of the proletariat of both nations (jointly with others) under the slogan of civil, class war for socialism and to propagandise

against the mobilisation of forces under the slogan of the 'right of nations to self-determination'.<sup>5</sup>

Bukharin, Bosch and Pyatakov made an exception for the colonies where there was only an embryonic capitalism (and a tiny proletariat). Here, they declared that, since the struggle 'is not a question of socialism' and because 'it can objectively aid the proletariat of the European continent', 'we can support the uprising of the popular classes'.<sup>6</sup>

Lenin replied that this whole approach reflected a failure to think through, not just the relationship between imperialism and national rights, but capitalism and democracy in general, of which the right of nations to self-determination is a specific application and integral part.

Bukharin and Pyatakov had allowed themselves to be disoriented by the crimes committed by the imperialists in the name of self-determination. They were terrified, by the social chauvinists' use of the slogan, into abandoning it altogether. In short, they deceived themselves into abandoning a vital slogan of the revolutionary programme, seeing this as the only way to avoid capitulating to the defence of the imperialist fatherland.

Lenin's reply acknowledged that the bourgeoisie utilised the right of nations to self-determination, just as it utilises the republic, the secular school, the free press, and parliamentarism, to drag the workers into support for the capitalist system. Through deception and fraud the democratic instincts and aspirations of the masses are turned against their own class interests. It is the task of Marxists to expose this fraud in every field where it occurs, not to counterpose to it the abstraction of the struggle for power, which in fact cannot take place until and unless the masses shed their democratic illusions in struggle.

Lenin's young opponents' argument against the right of nations to self-determination applies with full force to all rights, that is, to democracy as a whole. Lenin conceded that capitalism, especially in the imperialist epoch, brutally tramples on all these rights. But does this mean that they are worthless? Can the masses be told to put them aside and concentrate on the civil war against the bourgeoisie?

In reality, it is by these political assaults on the masses' rights, quite as much as by the pressure on their wages and their jobs, that the working class is roused into conscious action. The same applied to the peasants. Lenin pointed out that often it was precisely the national question which drew the peasantry into political life for the first time, becoming fused there with the social struggle against their, often foreign, landlords.

Lenin was repeating, on a higher level, the old battle against the 'Economists' of 1899-1902. They had tried to limit the definition of the class struggle to the economic struggle and such legal rights as affected the workers as workers. Struggles over political rights, rights applying generally to all classes, which in their origin did not transcend the formal framework of capitalist property relations, were to be left to the liberal bourgeoisie or until a later stage.

Lenin accurately invented a new label for his latest opponents' 'Imperialist Economists' and he warned that for all their 'left' subjective inclinations this too was a form of opportunism, because it ceded in practice the leadership of the struggles of the masses to political forces alien to the proletariat.

Lenin insisted that political oppression, discrimination, engenders yearnings and aspirations for democratic freedoms in the masses. Imperialism will intensify these aspirations. Thus to claim that the fight for them must be abandoned because they are a delusion under capitalism would mean to abandon participation in the inevitable and spontaneous struggle of the masses for their rights.

Furthermore, for Lenin this was not simply a matter of winning allies from outside the proletarian class,

important as this was, but of uniting the proletariat as a class both nationally and internationally. Lenin insists that the right of nations to self-determination, up to and including the freedom to secede, is the only basis for uniting the forces of the workers of all nations. It does not mean, as the Luxemburgists repeated time and time again, the advocacy of splintering into small states; on the contrary it opens the road to a voluntary unification process. In a reply to Pyatakov Lenin explained:

“The present war unites and merges nations into coalitions by means of violence and financial dependence. In our civil war against the bourgeoisie, we shall unite and merge the nations not by the force of the rouble, not by the force of the truncheon, but by voluntary agreement and solidarity of the working people against the exploiters. For the bourgeoisie the proclamation of the equal rights for all nations has become a deception. For us it will be the truth that will facilitate and accelerate the winning over of all nations. Without effectively organised democratic relations between nations, and consequently without freedom of secession, civil war of the workers and the working people generally of all nations against the bourgeoisie is impossible.”<sup>7</sup>

From 1903 to 1917, Trotsky generally conciliated between the two main factions of the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party (RSDLP). This led him into various harsh disputes with Lenin.

However, Trotsky never disagreed with Clause 9 of the party’s programme supporting the right of nations to self-determination. Yet Lenin several times expressed suspicion about Trotsky’s views because the latter was often involved in blocks with various forces who did not agree with Clause 9. The most famous of these was the August Bloc of 1912. Mensheviks, Polish Social Democrats and Bolshevik dissidents gathered in an highly unstable and unprincipled alliance. In conference they adopted a resolution endorsing the position of national-cultural autonomy. Lenin was thus able to stigmatise Trotsky’s views on the national question as wavering and unprincipled:

“Trotsky has never yet held a firm opinion on any important question of Marxism. He always contrives to worm his way into the cracks of any given difference of opinion and desert one side for the other.”<sup>8</sup>

In fact, Trotsky wrote little on the national question until the outbreak of the first world war. Then he began to give a very pointed emphasis to the role which national borders played as fetters on the forces of production, creating the internal convulsions which drove the imperialist powers to expansionist war. He supported a federation of European states as a solution to this development, something which Karl Kautsky had also taken up in the years before the war. This led Trotsky to hold very negative ideas about the viability of nation states, sometimes very similar to those of Bukharin:

“The war proclaims the downfall of the nation state [since] the present war is basically a revolt of the productive forces developed by capitalism against the nation state form of their exploitation.”<sup>9</sup>

He concluded that:

“... it is not the business of the European proletariat to defend the outlived national fatherland which has become the main brake on economic progress but rather to create a new more powerful, and more stable fatherland, the republican United States of Europe as the transition to the united states of the world.”<sup>10</sup>

Despite the fact that Lenin had also raised the slogan of the United States of Europe at the very beginning of the war he rapidly abandoned it, fearing that it possessed both a utopian and a reactionary side. The former could be used to de-focus from the inevitable necessity of socialist revolution breaking out first in a single country. The latter could mean support for its realisation under capitalism as an imperialist cartel, aimed at preserving the European states’ colonial empires against the United States.

After 1917 Trotsky was to give his slogan the new and definitive form of the Soviet or Socialist United States of Europe, in which form the revolutionary Comintern adopted and used it. But Trotsky clearly took the lead in adopting a federal solution to the problem of states where there was a need to express national self-determination whilst at the same time allowing the productive forces and economic life to transcend the cramping restriction of small states. To Lenin and the RSDLP's insistence on the right to self-determination Trotsky was willing to add the advocacy of voluntary federation.

In contrast to Bukharin, Trotsky stressed the clash between the productive forces and the isolated nation state, rather than their fusion with the nation state. Like Bukharin he came to the conclusion that in the new epoch the nation state was a reactionary utopia. Unlike Bukharin, however, Trotsky categorically refused to abandon the right of nations to self-determination. Rather, he explicitly included it amongst the key slogans raised in his first major work on the war, *The War and the International*. 11

Trotsky thus demonstrated a far more dialectical approach to the whole question than Bukharin. He could nevertheless be as insistent as the latter in his view that the national question had lost its independent force, separate from or counterposed to the struggle for proletarian power:

‘The national idea in its naked form, as counterposed to imperialism, is not only impotent, but reactionary; it drags the economic life of mankind back to the swaddling clothes of national limitedness.’<sup>12</sup>

But he went on to insist:

‘In contrast to the ‘socialist’ annexationists in Germany and elsewhere we do not intend to throw overboard the recognition of the right of nations to self-determination. On the contrary, we think that the epoch is approaching when this right can at last be realised. We are also infinitely distant from the idea of counterposing the sovereign rights of every national group and grouplet to the centralised needs of the economy. But in the very course of historical development we discover the dialectical reconciliation of both elements, the national and the economic. For us, recognition of every nation’s right to self-determination is necessarily complemented by the slogan of a democratic federation of all the advanced countries, the slogan of the United States of Europe.’<sup>13</sup>

Despite the ultimate fruitfulness of Trotsky’s view of federation as a resolution to the problem of small states, Lenin had a much clearer view of the revolutionary potential of national struggles against imperialism. This can be seen in the different positions of Radek, Trotsky and Lenin to the first serious outbreak of national revolt in Europe—the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916.

In an article entitled ‘The Song is Played Out’, Radek took a sarcastic and dismissive attitude to the rising. He argued that the whole Irish national struggle was ‘played out’ because it had always been fundamentally an agrarian question. Since the British had resolved the land question by buying out the Anglo-Irish landlords and creating a peasant proprietor class, the ‘so-called national question’ had evaporated as a serious social phenomenon. What was left was, in reality, simply a petit squabble between the British state and the Irish petty bourgeoisie.

‘This movement of Sinn Féin was a purely urban petty-bourgeois movement, and though it caused considerable commotion, it had little social backing. When its hopes for German assistance led it to revolt this amounted only to a putsch that the British government easily disposed of.’<sup>14</sup>

This was the classically Luxemburgist way of disposing of the national question; namely, to prove that the bourgeoisie had no interest in national independence, to reduce it to a squabble of the intelligentsia for privileges and thus to demonstrate its utopian character. Lenin’s response was ferocious:

?It is not surprising that this monstrously doctrinaire and pedantic assessment coincided with that of a Russian national-liberal Cadet Mr A Classier ... who also labelled the rebellion ?the Dublin Putsch?.?15

Contrary to Radek?s belief, the Dublin rising was related to a long-standing and profound national struggle against British imperialism, Lenin insisted. He went on:

?Whoever calls such a rebellion a ?putsch? is either a hardened reactionary, or a doctrinaire hopelessly incapable of envisaging a social revolution as a living phenomenon?. Lenin also insisted that:

? . . . to imagine that social revolution is conceivable without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church and the monarchy, against national oppression etc.?to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution.?16

Trotsky?s assessment, although flawed, was certainly better than Radek?s. Like Radek he stressed the failure of the Irish countryside to rise as a sign that the agrarian character of the national revolution was greatly weakened, indeed that ?the historical basis for a national revolution has disappeared even in backward Ireland?. But he particularly observed and emphasised the role played by a section of the Dublin working class:

?The young working class of Ireland, formed as it was in an atmosphere saturated with heroic memories of national rebellion, and coming into conflict with the egotistically narrow and imperially arrogant trade unionism of Britain, has naturally wavered between nationalism and syndicalism, and is always ready to link these two conceptions together in its revolutionary consciousness. It has attracted to itself some young intellectuals and certain nationalist enthusiasts, who in their turn have brought about the ascendancy of the green flag over the red in the labour movement. Thus the ?national revolution? in Ireland too, has amounted in practice to a workers? revolt . . . ?17

For all its perceptiveness, for all its recognition of the leading role the working class would have to play in order to defeat British imperialism, this assessment has two glaring weaknesses.

Firstly, it tends to reduce the national revolt to its working class component and thereby downplays the significance of the legitimate national revolt against imperialism of other classes.

It was no surprise that the small farmers lagged behind the advanced workers and urban petit bourgeoisie in 1916 but they were far from absent from the next wave of national revolt during 1918-1921. Secondly, it does not concern itself with the struggle for leadership within the context of a national struggle that the proletariat would have to consciously fight and win.

Lenin?s emphasis and the lessons he drew were different from both Radek?s and Trotsky?s. He did not believe that the national question was either ?played out? or that it ?amounts in practice to a workers? revolt?. He recognised the specific role of national struggles in the approaching Russian, European and world revolution:

?The dialectics of history are such that small nations, powerless as an independent factor in the struggle against imperialism, play a part as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli, which help the real anti-imperialist force, the socialist proletariat to make its appearance on the scene.?18

At the end of the 19th century Great Russians comprised only 44.3 per cent of the total population of the Tsarist empire<sup>19</sup>. During the February to October period the Provisional Government temporised with all of

Russia's nationalities, refusing to seriously address their demands for independence or autonomy. The partial exception was Poland which was already occupied by the Germans who had, in any case, given it formal independence under the "protection" of their eastern front forces.

Consequently, the degree of disillusionment with the Provisional Government and Kerensky gathered pace, especially in the western border regions, after the February Revolution. In Finland, Ukraine and also in the Caucasus, the Bolsheviks vigorously raised the slogan of self-determination.

After October 1917, once they were in power, the Bolsheviks proceeded to carry out their promises and proclaimed the freedom of all the formerly subject nations and nationalities to secede even where this meant the recognition of bourgeois and even counter-revolutionary regimes, as in Finland and Latvia. They also recognised the petit bourgeois nationalist regime in Ukraine and the Menshevik (social democratic) regime in Georgia.

The general rule which the Bolsheviks applied when recognising a secession of a formerly oppressed nation from the young workers' state was that such a recognition was unconditional; that is, it was not dependent on the prior triumph of the proletarian revolution, let alone a willingness to join the federation of soviet republics.

But at the same time the Bolsheviks declared their willingness to help the workers of these states in their own struggle for power, with arms and military intervention if necessary. In the savage civil war that was unfolding across the length and breadth of the former Tsarist Empire they also made it clear that they would take any necessary military actions against those newly independent bourgeois states that aided the counter revolution against the Russian workers' state.

In autumn 1917, Finland seemed as much on the verge of a proletarian revolution as Russia itself. In the 1916 elections to the Sejm (parliament), the Social Democrats won 103 seats out of two hundred—an absolute majority. They immediately legislated for the eight hour day and other social reforms.

After the February revolution the Finnish bourgeoisie had formed an alliance with Kerensky against the workers' parties majority in the Sejm. Kerensky obligingly ordered its forcible dissolution and new elections. Despite the fact that the Social Democrats won even more votes they narrowly lost their parliamentary majority.<sup>20</sup>

On 18 December 1917 Lenin was obliged to accord unconditional recognition to Finland's bourgeois government. In January 1918 the working class took power in all the major towns and cities. A "workers' government" subject to a central workers' council was formed by the Social Democrats and immediately recognised by the Bolsheviks. But the Social Democratic leaders rejected the idea that this workers' government should establish the dictatorship of the proletariat.

They proclaimed that they wanted "a parliamentary democracy in which the proletariat was the leading class". In fact they frittered away time in drawing up an ultra democratic parliamentary constitution for a Finnish Peoples' Republic. Meanwhile in the north, Mannerheim, a former general in the Russian army, was rallying and organising an army of White Guards, officer cadets and Swedish volunteers to drown the workers' government in blood.

A bloody civil war ensued ending in the triumph of the White Terror. Thousands of workers were killed in street fighting, in pitched battles and by firing squad. Victor Serge estimates that 100,000 workers, almost a quarter of the proletariat, were killed or received long prison sentences in horrific concentration camps. What occurred was nothing less than the "total extermination of the advanced and conscious elements of

the proletariat?. 21

Rosa Luxemburg thought that this terrible catastrophe proved that the Bolsheviks had been terribly wrong to recognise the independence of Finland, that the defeat suffered by the Finns was a product of the 'addled egg' of self-determination out of which crept the German bayonets. Looking at the border regions from Finland in the north to the Caucasus in the south she drew the conclusion:

'One after another these 'nations' used the freshly granted freedom to ally themselves with German imperialism against the Russian Revolution as its mortal enemy and under German protection to carry the banner of counter revolution into Russia itself.'<sup>22</sup>

Luxemburg's conclusion was that all this demonstrated the 'petit bourgeois utopian character' of the slogan and that 'in the midst of the crude realities of class society and when class antagonisms are sharpened to the uttermost it is simply converted into a means of bourgeois class rule.'<sup>23</sup> The Bolsheviks, in her view, had broken the united phalanx of the working class and handed over the proletariats of the border states to counter revolution. Instead, they should have defended, 'tooth and nail the integrity of the Russian Empire as an area of revolution, opposing to all forms of separatism the solidarity and inseparability of the proletarians of all lands within the sphere of the Russian Revolution as the highest command of politics.'<sup>24</sup>

Several times Lenin had bracketed Ukraine, with Poland and Finland, as nations that could and must be allowed to secede if they so wished it. This view was vigorously opposed by those Bolsheviks in Russia influenced by Rosa Luxemburg on the national question and by many Bolsheviks from the Russophone eastern Ukraine.

They tended to deny the very existence of a Ukrainian nation. Yet Lenin's recognition of the national identity of the Ukrainians showed his prescience, his ability to foresee events because he understood the line of development, rather than simply taking his bearings from a snapshot of existing conditions.

It is certainly true that in the early years of the twentieth century Ukraine had a much less developed national movement than Poland or Finland. A modern historian of Ukraine has commented:

'On the eve of the first world war and the revolution, Ukrainians were a people who had not yet developed a crystallised national consciousness and whose emergence to the stature of statehood seemed like a distant goal'<sup>25</sup>.

The problem that the Ukrainian nationalists faced was that in Ukraine the majority of the modern classes, the proletariat, the merchants and factory owners, were not Ukrainian speakers. Indeed, 'the characteristic feature of towns in the Ukraine was that with a few exceptions they were Russian and Jewish in national composition and in their Weltanschauung.'<sup>26</sup>

In the 1897 census Ukrainians constituted less than one third of the urban population and 93% of them were registered as belonging to the peasant estate. Moreover, with all state education, from school to university, being conducted in Russian, the development of a Ukrainian press, literature and intelligentsia was stunted if not blocked altogether.

It was therefore scarcely surprising that Rosa Luxemburg was at her most polemically ferocious when it came to attacking Lenin's recognition of Ukraine's right to self-determination. In her assessment of the Russian Revolution, written in 1918, she wrote:

'Ukrainian nationalism in Russia was something quite different from, let us say, Czech, Polish or Finnish

nationalism, in that the former was a mere whim, a folly of a few dozen petit bourgeois intellectuals without the slightest roots in the economic, political or psychological relationships of the country; it was without any historical tradition, since the Ukraine never formed a nation or government, was without any national culture, except for the reactionary-romantic poems of Shevchenko. It is exactly as if one fine day the people living in the Wasserkante should want to found a new Low German (Plattdeutsche) nation and government! And this ridiculous pose of a few university professors and students was inflated into a political nightmare by Lenin and his comrades through their doctrinaire agitation concerning the 'right of nations to self-determination'.?27

Lenin, in contrast, understood the unevenness of economic and social development in the Tsarist Empire. He realised that some areas were still passing through the stage of development towards capitalism even if the cities of the empire were carrying through the socialist revolution.

He was acutely conscious of the development of national identity as the means through which the peasant masses entered the modern world and absorbed bourgeois culture, a huge step forward from medieval and clerical backwardness. For this reason Lenin never took a hostile, or indifferent, attitude to the nationalism of an oppressed people, no matter how weak or primitive its social development was.

As a Great Russian he considered such attitudes to be a shocking concession to great nation chauvinism. He never failed to stigmatise the 'left' position as objective opportunism, whatever the good intentions of its supporters. Given the Polish landlord's historic role in oppressing the Ukrainian peasantry such an attitude from Rosa Luxemburg deserved Lenin's strictures.

The isolation of the Ukrainian nationalist intellectuals from the mass of the Ukrainian people was in large part due to the Tsarist police dictatorship. The arrival of, first bourgeois, and then workers' democracy, precisely allowed a rapid development of the Ukrainian language, culture and nationalism. This spread well beyond the circles of the intelligentsia.

Revolutionaries are unwise to celebrate indifference to nationalism by a cruelly oppressed people as a sign of internationalism. It will be a weak and sickly internationalism that grows on the soil 'prepared' by national oppression, discrimination and general cultural impoverishment. Should revolutionary internationalists have the opportunity to rouse the masses from political slumber they have the imperative duty to take up the issue of national oppression, without themselves becoming nationalists. If they do not, then sooner or later nationalists will sweep them aside.

Events in Ukraine were determined objectively by its strategic importance both in the closing phase of the imperialist war and the three years of the Russian Civil War. They were determined subjectively not only by the weakness of Ukrainian petit bourgeois nationalism, but also by the conflicts within the Bolshevik ranks on how to handle the national question there.

A Ukrainian assembly?the National Rada (council)?was formed in Kiev soon after the February revolution. This Rada was dominated by petit bourgeois nationalists and semi-Marxist intellectuals like Mikhail Hrushevsky and Vladimir Vinnichenko. Over the next few months it grew into an (unelected) national assembly of some 600 members. They had previously set as their goal not independence but a federal relationship with the rest of Russia.

In July the Rada, exasperated with the prevarication of Kerensky, finally set up an administration in Ukraine with the aid of the adventurer Simon Petlyura. On 19 November the Rada proclaimed a Ukrainian Peoples' Republic but still without availing itself of the right to secede which the Bolsheviks proclaimed in the Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia.

Lenin's immediate reaction was to emphasise the need to accord the Ukraine the right to secede or to federate with the Soviet Republic:

‘We now see a national movement in the Ukraine and we say that we stand unconditionally for the Ukrainian people's complete and unlimited freedom. We have to wipe out that old bloodstained and dirty past when the Russia of the capitalist oppressors acted as the executioner of other peoples. We are determined to wipe out that past, and leave no trace of it (stormy applause). We are going to tell the Ukrainians that as Ukrainians they can go ahead and arrange their life as they see fit. But we are going to stretch out a fraternal hand to the Ukrainian workers and tell them that together with them we are going to fight against their bourgeoisie and ours. Only a socialist alliance of the working peoples of all countries can remove all ground for national persecution and strife.’<sup>28</sup>

The petit bourgeois nationalists who dominated the Rada rapidly became hostile to the growth of soviets in the Ukraine and their attempts to establish their own power. The Rada refused outright to recognise this soviet power. In addition, counter revolutionary armies led by Kornilov and Kaledin were beginning to use Ukrainian territory to launch war against the Russian government. The Rada did nothing to stop this and actually took actions to disarm the Red guards and revolutionary regiments trying to combat Kaledin.

The Soviet Government replied with a declaration, drafted by Lenin on 17 December 1917, which combined recognition of Ukrainian independence with a threat to declare war unless the Rada stopped its hostile military actions and its repression of the Ukrainian soviets:

‘. . . the Socialist government of Russia . . . reaffirms that the right to self-determination belongs to all nations oppressed by Tsarism and the Great Russian bourgeoisie, up to and including the right of these nations to secede from Russia.

Accordingly we, the Council of Peoples' Commissars, recognise the People's Ukrainian Republic, and its right to secede from Russia or enter into a treaty with the Russian Republic on federal or similar relations between them. We, the Council of People's Commissars, recognise at once, unconditionally and without reservations everything that pertains to the Ukrainian people's national rights and national independence.

We have not taken a single step, in the sense of restricting the Finnish people's national rights or national independence, against the bourgeois Finnish Republic, which still remains bourgeois, nor shall we take any steps restricting the national independence of any nation which had been or desires to be part of the Russian Republic.’<sup>29</sup>

But events within Ukraine were moving to a denouement between the Rada and the Ukrainian Bolsheviks. Though an uneasy peace had followed the December Russian ultimatum on 29 January 1918 the Rada finally proclaimed secession.

At the Brest-Litovsk negotiations with German imperialism Rada's negotiators sided openly with the Germans making a play for their assistance. Meanwhile in Ukraine, the Bolsheviks, led by Yurii Pyatakov, had set up a Soviet government in Kharkov, the capital of the industrialised and heavily Russified eastern Ukraine. Red troops advanced on Kiev. Because they proclaimed the slogans of ‘land to the peasants’ and ‘the factories to the workers’ they were enthusiastically received, even in Kiev.

But the rule of the Ukrainian Soviet government was to last a mere three weeks. The Brest negotiations broke down and the Germans resumed the offensive. The old Tsarist army had dissolved, almost completely, between October and February but the new Red Army had yet to be constructed. Thus the Soviet forces were swept backwards as quickly as they had advanced.

The cynical German High Command, once it had conquered Ukraine under the legal cover of the Rada, at once threw it aside like a squeezed orange. It set up an openly White Guardist government under Hetman Skoropadsky. In November 1918 when the German war effort finally collapsed so did this government. Briefly, the Rada returned, this time under French imperialist sponsorship.

Again the Bolsheviks, under Pyatakov, seized power with a general strike in eastern Ukraine. Between the end of November and February 1919 the Bolshevik forces fought their way westward. Rada forces in retreat carried out horrific pogroms against the Jewish population. Again the Red Army was received enthusiastically.

The next two years however were ones of brutal civil war. Denikin's Whites, the 'Russian Volunteer army', the Red Army, Nestor Makhno's forces, peasant 'Greens' as well as Petlyura's Rada, now backed by the Polish government of Pilsudski, all fought over Ukraine. Not until August 1921 did the last anti-Bolshevik forces leave Ukraine.

Thus the brutal facts of the Civil War revealed that the Ukrainian petit bourgeois nationalists could only hold onto power either with the aid of the German or the French imperialists. Vinnichenko himself accurately pinpointed their weakness. It was 'to develop in the mind of the masses a conflict between the national and the social idea.'<sup>30</sup>

In short if the Ukrainian peasant masses were forced to choose between the land and Ukrainian culture they unhesitatingly chose the former.

Nevertheless, in conditions of Civil War, when the surrounding states were being used as bases by the White armies and the imperialists to attack the workers' state, the Bolsheviks simply had to put the victory against these forces above the formal self-determination of some of these regimes. Ukraine became the theatre of war between White Guardists, Ukrainian Nationalists and the anarchist 'social bandit' Makhno. The eventual outcome was that after many reversals Ukraine eventually fell to the Red Army and a regime of soviets took the power once again, this time permanently.

The weakness of the Ukrainian nationalists encouraged a section of the Bolsheviks in Ukraine to neglect, and even denigrate the national question. It required a persistent effort by Lenin and Trotsky at the centre to correct this line. Pyatakov, a key figure during these years, maintained his hostility to self-determination.

Pyatakov was at this time a Left Communist, along with Bukharin, violently opposed to the Brest Peace and determined to carry on revolutionary war come what may. In August 1918, against Moscow's advice, he called for a Ukraine-wide uprising against Skoropadsky that ended in complete disaster.

Moscow intervention in 1918/1919 produced a change of leadership with Christian Rakovsky sent in to head the government. Rakovsky at first also underestimated the national question, thinking that Ukraine was no nation and its national movement a mere invention of the intelligentsia. Thus he proclaimed a policy of 'linguistic Russification' and in addition he pursued a leftist agrarian policy that alienated the middle peasants. Thus Rakovsky added to Pyatakov's mistakes.

Lenin in Moscow and Trotsky as the commander of the Red Army were obliged to correct matters. During these years the revolution was fighting for its life and the masses of Ukraine were not first and foremost concerned with the question of national independence.

In this context it was possible, even necessary, to temporarily subordinate the whole question of self-determination to winning the war. But as the Bolshevik forces gained the upper hand it became necessary to re-assert a correct stance with regard to the Ukrainian masses' national feelings.

When the Red Army re-entered Ukraine in November 1919 Trotsky issued strict orders to the troops:

‘The Ukraine is the land of the Ukrainian workers and working peasants. They alone have the right to rule in Ukraine, to govern it and to build a new life in it. Keep this firmly in mind; your task is not to conquer the Ukraine but to liberate it. When Denikin’s bands have been smashed, the working people of the liberated Ukraine will themselves decide on what terms they are to live with Soviet Russia. We are all sure that, and we know that the working people of the Ukraine will declare for the closest fraternal union with us. . . Long live the free and independent Soviet Ukraine.’<sup>31</sup>

With Lenin’s aid the Bolshevik leaders set out to adopt a more sensitive and principled strategy on the national question in Ukraine. The importance of using the Ukrainian language and respecting its culture was stressed. This helped to win over the Borotbists—a split from the Ukrainian Left-Socialist Revolutionaries—to the Ukrainian Communist Party.

Winning them was important because, unlike the Ukrainian Bolsheviks, they had deep roots amongst the peasantry. They were adamantly in favour of an independent Ukraine. In conditions of civil war Lenin, correctly, would not concede a division of the state forces facing a multiplicity of White Guard armies and foreign interventionists.

But Lenin made the Borotbists the promise that a constituent Soviet assembly would decide the future of Ukraine, for total independence or against, once the Civil War was won. Sadly, the acute post-war crisis of 1921—the Kronstad revolt and the peasant uprisings against War Communism, the crisis in the Bolshevik party as a whole that led to the banning of factions, and then the rapid growth of bureaucracy—all combined to bury this promise.

In the middle of the Civil War the Bolsheviks, at their eighth Congress, returned to debating the programme draft. In March 1919 they finally adopted it and after the Congress Bukharin and Preobrazhensky were authorised to produce a commentary on it which was entitled the ABC of Communism. At the eighth RCP(B) Congress Lenin confronted Bukharin once more on the question which had divided them since 1915. Now Bukharin was trying to turn Lenin’s flank by talking about the right to self-determination of the working people alone.

Of course, workers and peasants made up the vast majority of any nation and therefore Lenin like the other Bolsheviks had often said that only if these majority classes of the nation are genuinely and democratically consulted can revolutionaries recognise the true self-determination of the people. But he rejected the idea that a pre-condition should be attached to self-determination; that only these classes could decide.

Lenin considered this yet another example of Bukharin’s failure to understand how the recognition of self-determination was precisely designed to hasten an as yet far from complete class differentiation between the possessing classes within the given nation—bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, gentry—and the exploited classes. Thus a prior class differentiation could not be a condition for recognising self-determination. He used his rebuttal of Bukharin to explain and defend the Bolsheviks’ whole approach since 1917:

‘I have to say the same thing about the national question. Here too the wish is father to the thought with comrade Bukharin. He says that we must not recognise the right of nations to self-determination. A nation means the bourgeoisie together with the proletariat. And are we the proletarians, to recognise the right to self-determination of the despised bourgeoisie? That is absolutely incompatible! Pardon me it is compatible with what actually exists. If you eliminate this, the result will be sheer fantasy. You refer to the process of differentiation that is taking place within the nations, the process of separation of the proletariat from the

bourgeoisie. But let us see how this process of differentiation will proceed.

To reject the self-determination of nations and insert the self-determination of the working people would be absolutely wrong, because this manner of settling the question does not reckon with the difficulties, with the zig-zag course taken by the differentiation within nations.

As long as the bourgeoisie or the petit bourgeoisie, or even part of the German workers are under the influence of this bugbear??the Bolsheviks want to establish their system by force??so long will the formula ?the self-determination of the working people? not help matters.

Our programme must not speak of the self-determination of the working people, because that would be wrong. It must speak of what actually exists. Since nations are at different stages on the road from medievalism to bourgeois democracy and from bourgeois democracy to proletarian democracy, this thesis of our programme is absolutely correct. With us there have been very many zigzags on this road. Every nation must obtain the right to self-determination, and that will make the self-determination of the working people easier. In Finland the process of separation of the proletariat from the bourgeoisie is remarkably clear, forceful and deep. At any rate things will not proceed there as they do in our country. If we were to declare that we do not recognise any Finnish nation, but only the working people, that would be sheer nonsense. We cannot refuse to recognise what actually exists; it will compel us to recognise it.?<sup>32</sup>

At the eighth Congress of the RCP(B) Lenin applied exactly the same method to Poland. As elsewhere in 1917, the Bolsheviks had immediately recognised the independence of Poland. But in 1920 they were to make a tactical mistake that cost them dearly. As the founder of the Red Army, Trotsky did not underestimate the revolutionary role of the army of a workers? state. Yet it was he in particular who urged restraint during the Red Army?s advance on Warsaw in the summer of 1920.

This time it was Lenin, eager to break through Poland, to a Germany seething with revolution, who underestimated the national feelings of the Poles. Trotsky was proved right. The Poles, workers as well as peasants, feared the Red Army, seeing it as yet another army of their Russian oppressors. They did not rise in rebellion against their internal class enemies.

There were other examples where the Bolsheviks, or the Red Army, did intervene militarily in states or republics and overthrew their bourgeois or feudal reactionary governments.

When the imperialists were threatening to occupy a strategic national territory to facilitate their attack on the workers? state or when the internal counter-revolution was using independence as a pretext to seize and prepare a drill ground for civil war, intervention proved necessary. Georgia was such case.

Georgia?a predominantly peasant country lacking a modern industrial proletariat?was dominated by the Mensheviks, who had said little or nothing about Georgian independence under the Tsar or under Kerensky. But the October Revolution converted them overnight into fierce Georgian nationalists.

At the end of the Russian Civil War in early 1920, the Georgian Bolshevik Sergo Orjonikidze wired Lenin that ?we will be in Tiflis by 15 May?. This drew a sharp order forbidding any such attempt and, moreover, an instruction to grant immediate recognition of the Menshevik government and Georgian independence.

The Menshevik government, nevertheless, began to negotiate with the imperialists for their troops to enter Georgia to ?protect? it. In December 1920 the Armenian nationalists (the Dashnaks), who had been fighting a losing battle with Mustapha Kemal?s army, accepted Soviet protection, declared a soviet Armenian republic and federation with Soviet Azerbaijan and Russia. Georgia was thus surrounded by Soviet territory. Orjonikidze began to bombard Moscow for requests to intervene but was repeatedly

instructed to maintain correct relations with Tiflis.

Early in February 1921 Orjonikidze proposed the immediate forcible sovietization of Georgia by the Red Army. Trotsky, opposing this, 'stood for a certain preparatory period of work inside Georgia, in order to develop the uprising and then come to its aid.'<sup>33</sup> Lenin expressed concern at both the unpreparedness of Georgia for soviet rule and the complications it might lead to with Kemalist Turkey. He also complained of the lack of serious information forwarded to Moscow.

Nevertheless, Orjonikidze, in collusion with Stalin in Moscow, went ahead with organising minor uprisings and clashes in the border district. When an insurrection actually broke out on 14 February the Politburo reluctantly agreed to send in the Red Army to assist it. Trotsky was absent and not consulted. He later commented that 'detachments of the Red Army invaded Georgia upon Stalin's orders and had confronted us with a fait accompli.'<sup>34</sup>

In essence the project was a pure Stalin-Orjonikidze one. They saw no reason to await the political maturation of the Georgian workers and poor peasants nor did they have the slightest sensitivities to the national feelings of their fellow countrymen. On 25 February the Menshevik government fled Tiflis and three weeks later abandoned Georgian territory altogether.

Whilst the popularity of the Menshevik regime was certainly waning due to its unsatisfactory solution of the land question, and a turn to the Bolsheviks by workers, soldiers and poor peasants was noted by independent observers, the two Georgian Bolsheviks, had little concern for or patience with the idea of aiding the maturing of a revolutionary situation within Georgia. Once carried out, Lenin and Trotsky had to defend the action and roundly denounced the complaints of the Mensheviks and the Second International.

But Lenin's real concerns are clear in his telegram to the victorious Bolshevik forces. As well as demanding that Orjonikidze 'immediately arm the workers and the poorest peasants, creating a strong Georgian Red Army' and saying that, 'essential is a policy of concessions to the Georgian intelligentsia and small traders', he went on to stress that it was 'gigantically important to search for an acceptable compromise for a block with Zhordania and similar Georgian Mensheviks, those who before the uprising had not been absolutely hostile to the idea of a Soviet order in Georgia under certain conditions.'<sup>35</sup>

This proposal proved unrealisable because Zhordania had fled the country, and because the Mensheviks, in reality, preferred an alliance with French imperialism to one with the Bolsheviks.

Trotsky defended the actions of the Bolsheviks in the immediate aftermath. But he formulated his defence in terms of the principles it is necessary to use, principles which, he was later to admit, Stalin and Orjonikidze did not adhere to in the least:

'A workers' state, in recognising the right of self-determination, thereby recognises that revolutionary coercion is not an all-powerful historical factor. Soviet Russia does not by any means intend to make its military power take the place of the revolutionary efforts of the proletariats of other countries. The conquest of power must be the outcome of proletarian political experience. This does not mean that the revolutionary efforts of the workers of Georgia or of any other country, must not receive any military support from outside. It is only essential that this support should come at a moment when the need for it has been created by the political development of the workers, and recognised by the class-conscious revolutionary vanguard, who have won the sympathy of the majority of the workers. These are questions of revolutionary strategy, and not of formal democratic ritual.'<sup>36</sup>

As Lenin recognised, Central Asia and Siberia constituted the colonial possessions of Tsarism and the

Russian imperialist bourgeoisie. From the 1890s onwards the government encouraged a massive colonisation drive into the steppes. Nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples, like the Kazakhs, the Kalmyks and the Bashkirs, found their best grazing lands occupied by Russian peasants and guarded by Cossack troops. A serious Kazakh rebellion against this had occurred in 1916.

Despite the backwardness of these nomadic peoples the Bolsheviks pledged themselves to recognise their self-determination too. The ABC of Communism (the official commentary on the Russian Communist Party's programme) poses the problem thus:

What is to happen to nations which not only have no proletariat, but have not even a bourgeoisie, or if they have it, have it only in an immature form? Consider, for example the Tunguses, the Kalmucks, or the Buryats, who inhabit Russian territory. What is to be done if these nations demand separation from the great civilised nations? Still more, what is to be done if they wish to secede from nations which have realised socialism? Surely to permit such secessions would be to strengthen barbarism at the expense of civilisation?

The proletariat, having no desire to plunder the colonies, can procure from them by exchange of goods such raw materials as are required, and can leave to the natives of backward lands the right to arrange their own internal affairs as they please. The Communist Party, therefore, wishing to put an end forever to all forms of national oppression and national inequality, voices the demand for the national right of self-determination.<sup>37</sup>

Initially, at least in the more settled regions of Central Asia, the Bolsheviks allied themselves wherever possible with the nationalist intelligentsia, with reformers and modernisers. Many of these were petit-bourgeois or even bourgeois, some were reforming Islamists, others influenced by pan-Turkic or pan-Mongolian ideologies. Central Asia and Siberia, like Ukraine, were drawn into the Civil War.

Thus there were many large scale and rapid manoeuvres by Red and White forces on the open steppe and consequent changeovers of control which gave little time for consulting the desires of the nationalities. The soviets which the Red Army set up were more formal than real.

Worse, they were often dominated by the Russian colonists who remained at war with the native peoples. Bolshevik decrees forbade the continuation of settlement and the seizure of pasture land but it was difficult to undo past injustices and in the later 1920s and 1930s colonisation began again.

Likewise with the national republics and autonomous regions. They were set up, federated and even dissolved with a rapidity that betokened their shallow social and national roots. This is not surprising given that most of the peoples, the ethno-linguistic groups of Eastern Russia and Central Asia, had not yet reached the stage of mass national consciousness. There were some exceptions however.

The Tatars of the lower Volga had a mercantile bourgeoisie and this leadership rapidly proved hostile to the Bolsheviks. This led to various interventions, re-ordering from above of autonomous regions and republics with other minority peoples (e.g. the Bashkirs) to control the Tatars. Stalin's Commissariat of Nationalities used these administrative measures to promote those ethnic groups which were most malleable.

A similar fragmentation policy was used against the Mongol peoples of the Chinese borderlands. This left a legacy of mistrust between the larger peoples, like the Tatars, something made worse by the repression of later decades.

In south Central Asia the settled populations of Khiva, Bokhara and Turkestan presented another problem,

the influence of pan-Turkic nationalism and the hold of Islam. The landowners and the mullahs formed a possessing class bitterly hostile to communism. Yet Russian settlement meant that in a number of cities soviets existed and indeed seized power. This led in mid-1918 to the foundation of a Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.

But these local Bolshevik regimes too were rooted almost exclusively in the Russian urban settler population. Finally, it was the Red Army which overthrew the Khans and the Amirs of the Central Asian states. This forced sovietisation<sup>38</sup> was, whatever its justification in terms of the Civil War, no guide for Marxists in formulating a revolutionary policy for nationalities, even amongst backward peoples.

Prior to October, Lenin, following Marx and Engels, advocated a unitary and centralised state:

Marxists, are of course, opposed to federation and decentralisation, for the simple reason that capitalism requires for its development the largest and most centralised possible states. Other conditions being equal, the class conscious proletariat will always stand for the larger state . . . But while and insofar as different nations constitute a single state, Marxists will never under any circumstances, advocate either the federal principle or decentralisation . . . It would, however be inexcusable to forget that we advocate exclusively democratic centralism . . . Far from precluding local self-government, with autonomy for regions having special economic and social conditions, a distinct national composition of the population, and so forth, democratic centralism necessarily demands both . . . The autonomous Diets, on the basis of the general laws of the country, should deal with questions of purely local, regional or national significance.<sup>39</sup>

Yet after the Bolshevik regime was in power, in January 1918, it proclaimed a federation of Soviet republics founded upon the principle of a free union of the peoples of Russia?. In July 1918 the first Constitution proclaimed Russia a federation. The workers and peasants wherever they held power could, through their soviet organisations, declare their adhesion to it.

However, the conditions of a long and bloody civil war, which ebbed and flowed over the vast territories of the former Tsarist Empire, were not those best suited to realising the ideals of voluntary federation or voluntary separation. Independent states formed by local elites, oscillated between the Whites and the Reds, fearing the former for their Great Russian chauvinism and imperialism and the latter because of their social radicalism.

The Treaty of Union of 1922 was adopted as the result of a bitter battle between Lenin and Stalin over the national question. At first Stalin simply wished all the non-Russian republics, Ukraine, a new Caucasian Federation as well as the soviet republics of Central Asia, to adhere to the Russian Federation as merely autonomous republics. This meant the loss of a large degree of independence?.

Up to now these states were bound to the federation by formally equal treaties. This autonomisation project? was bitterly opposed especially by the Ukrainian and Georgian leaders. It was also firmly rejected by Lenin. He proposed instead a new federation of equal republics, with a government and congress of Soviets separate to and superior to that of the Russian Federation.

Whilst Stalin formally conceded to Lenin's plan, calling the new body the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the content was essentially the same. Lenin, virtually on his deathbed, launched another struggle. His words should warn Marxists how far from being a revolutionary model was the work of the Commissariat of Nationalities under Stalin (1917-24):

Before the workers of Russia, I am terribly guilty of not having devoted sufficient energy to the famous question of autonomisation?, officially called the Union Of Soviet Socialist Republics?.

Lenin believed that the project of the USSR treaty reduced 'the freedom to leave the Union, which is our justification, to a mere scrap of paper.'<sup>40</sup>

Lenin sought to protect the delicate alliance with the nationalities by fighting Great Russian bullying and bureaucracy. His struggle, alas, was unsuccessful. The twelfth Congress of the RCP(B), in April 1923, discussed the national question once more in the wake of the Georgian incident and in relation to the continuing discussion on the Union and the constitution.

Christian Rakovsky, then chairman of the Ukrainian Council of Peoples' Commissars, attacked the growing bureaucratism of the party apparatus and linked it to the centralising bullying attitude of Stalin on the question of the second tier of the All Union Soviet, that of the nationalities.

Stalin was determined that the Russian Federation would have an overwhelming majority of the votes, on this body. Ukraine was to have four votes while Russia would have between 64 and 70.

Rakovsky attacked the central bureaucracy saying that, 'particularly on the national question our party comrades are guided not by a proletarian party psychology but by what you might call, to put it mildly, a narrow executive bureaucratic psychology . . . Naturally, it's tiresome to administer twenty republics, how convenient it would be if the whole lot were unified and you only had to press one button to administer the whole country . . . we must take away nine tenths of the power of the All-Union Commissariats and hand them over to the national republics.'<sup>41</sup>

The USSR's 1924 Constitution was one of the first fruits of the Thermidorian reaction. Indeed the Thermidorians around Stalin (Dzerzhinsky, Orjonikidze) cut their teeth in the fight against 'national liberalism'.

The future Left-Opportunist, Christian Rakovsky, was fully engaged in this struggle but Trotsky failed to take up Lenin's cause as he had been requested to do. Stalin's policy on the national question was to deny in practice all political independence, utilising the centralised bureaucracy of the party to completely dominate the republics and autonomous regions. Any opponents were purged, accused of nationalist deviations.

Yet at the same time Stalin adopted a policy of cultural nation-building, korenizatsiia (nativization). In many of its formal goals it took up Lenin's concern to correct the results of the Civil War phase when Great Russian Bolsheviks took over wherever the Red Army was victorious. To the indigenous population this looked like the triumph once again of the Russian colonisers:

'Nativisation' involved the promotion of the local languages to become languages of state and administration, literacy campaigns, the development of new written languages from one or more dialects, the stimulation of art and popular culture.

At the same time a process of filling the upper echelons of the republican parties with the titular nationals rather than with Great Russians was a feature of the whole 1920s. In themselves most of these measures were very progressive though they were accompanied by a positive nation building ethos that was alien to Lenin.

Under conditions of increasing appointment from the central bureaucracy and political repression (including the breaking up of republics such as Turkestan and the combining of others) these policies amounted to an ironic fulfilment of the Austro-Marxist programme of national-cultural autonomy. As a policy it encouraged the development of (certain) national entities. Indeed, it created them in some cases. At the same time it negated the right to political self-government let alone the right to secede. This failed to remove the sense

of national restriction of rights and ultimately of oppression.

The manoeuvrings, re-definings, splitting and unifying of nations 'from above' was to inflame national grievances especially when from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s a wave of furious Great Russian chauvinism was unleashed. Last but not least there was the suppression of real proletarian internationalism as a positive ideal that could only have been possible on the basis of soviet democracy. Thus Stalin's policy could never hope to resolve the national question.

The above policy lasted until 1933-34 and was, in essence, the national policy of the Soviet Thermidor (the period of the consolidation of Stalin's power). Thereafter, a new harsher policy was imposed, that of Soviet Bonapartism. It was a policy of outright national oppression which returned the USSR to the status of a 'prison house of nations'.

The cutting edge of the new policy 'the battle against nationalism' was felt first and most harshly in Ukraine. It was initiated as early as 1930 with show trials against Ukrainian 'nationalists'. Ukrainian nationalism became the 'main threat', the 'spearhead of capitalist restoration'. In 1933/4 a massive purge removed most of the Ukrainian party leadership replacing them with Moscow bureaucrats. This policy spread rapidly to the other republics and nationalities. In Tadjikistan the entire leadership was removed. The new national intelligentsia created by the previous policy was persecuted and scattered.

A glorification of Great Russian culture and history thinly, disguised as Soviet patriotism, triumphed. The Great Russian people were proclaimed the 'elder brother and guide' of the other peoples.

The nomadic populations of Central Asia were forcibly settled, which led to the revival of guerrilla war, and to a population loss of 20% amongst the Kazakhs, the most numerous nomadic people, with over one million households in the 1920s. Kazakhstan was settled with Russian and Ukrainian people (often deported 'kulaks', that is those who resisted forced collectivisation).

The Great Purges of 1936-38 meant a further intensification of national oppression. 'Trotskyite-nationalists' figure in large number amongst the victims. The purges eliminated the greater part of the 'Stalinist' elite built up after 1923, including the party leadership and the cultural intelligentsia built up throughout the period of korenizatsiia.

It was a cultural genocide perpetrated against the peoples 'awakened' to national life by Stalin's earlier policies. These crimes were to weigh heavily in the balance against the workers' state after 1988, providing a powerful propaganda weapon for nationalist restorationists. With such an explosive charge of brutal national oppression built into its foundations it is no surprise that the national question was one of the key factors in blowing up the USSR.

Indeed, it was the Stalinist-nationalist government of Ukraine which refused to sign the new union treaty of Gorbachev and thus precipitated not merely his downfall but the dissolution of the USSR itself.

Only early and unconditional recognition of the right to secede advocated by a conscious proletarian revolutionary vanguard, could have challenged the nationalists for the leadership of the workers of the non-Russian peoples, thus exposing the nationalist restorationists.

Once the mass movements for complete separation came into existence then it became vital to adopt Trotsky's slogan of independent soviet (workers' council) republics as well as the slogan of a free and voluntary federation after this had been achieved. |

## NOTES

- 1 L Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, London, 1972, Vol 3 p62
- 2 In Trotskyist International No 12 we reviewed the debate in the Second International, in the years before 1914, which pitted Lenin against Otto Bauer and Rosa Luxemburg.
- 3 N Bukharin, *Imperialism and World Economy*, London, 1972, pp73/74 Bukharin's methodological error can be summed up in the statement that he "extrapolated tendencies of development in the world economy to such an extent that he often lost sight of contradictory lines of development altogether." "Revolutionary theory and imperialism". K Hassell, *Permanent Revolution* No 8 Spring 1989 p37.
- 4 Closely linked to them was the Dutch communist Anton Pannekoek, who in a 1912 work, *The Class struggle and the Nation*, had written an attack on the right of nations to self-determination as opportunist.
- 5 K Radek, "Theses on the Right of Nations to Self-Determination" in *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, New York, 1984, p362
- 6 *ibid*, pp363-4
- 7 V I Lenin, "Reply to P Kievsky" *ibid*, p369.
- 8 V I Lenin, "Right of Nations to Self-Determination" in *Questions of National Policy and Self-Determination*, Moscow 1970, p97
- 9 L. Trotsky, "Nation and Economy?", in *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, *op cit*, p371.
- 10 *ibid*
- 11 L Trotsky, *The War and the International*, London, 1971
- 12 L. Trotsky, "Nation and Economy?", *op cit*
- 13 *ibid*.
- 14 K Radek, "The Song is played out?", in *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, *op cit*, pp 374-375
- 15 V I Lenin "The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up" *Questions of National Policy and Self-Determination*, Moscow, 1970, p159
- 16 *ibid*
- 17 L Trotsky, "Lessons of the Events in Dublin?", in *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, *op cit*, p373
- 18 V I Lenin "The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up?", *op cit*.
- 19 Excluding the Grand Duchy of Finland.
- 20 The chronic constitutionalism and parliamentary cretinism of the Finnish Social Democrats was now revealed. Otto Kuusinen, later to become one of the luminaries of the Stalinised Comintern and then a prominent leader of the Social Democracy summed up their attitude. "Wishing not to risk our democratic conquests, and hoping to manoeuvre around this turning point of history by our parliamentary skill, we decided to evade the revolution. We did not believe in the revolution; we reposed no hope in it; we had no wish for it." Quoted in Victor Serge *Year One of the Russian Revolution*, London 1972 p184
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- 23 *ibid*
- 24 *ibid*, p382.
- 25 Bohdan Krawchenko, *Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth Century Ukraine*, Oxford, 1985 p1
- 26 *ibid*, p5
- 27 R Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution" in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, *op cit*, pp382-3
- 28 V I Lenin, "Speech at the First All-Russia Congress of the Navy?", *CW vol26* p344
- 29 V I Lenin "Manifesto to the Ukrainian People with an Ultimatum to the Ukrainian RADA?", *CW vol 26* p361
- 30 Quoted in E H Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution* Harmondsworth, 1966, Vol 1 p310

- 31 Cited in Z Kowalewski, 'For the Independence of Soviet Ukraine?' in International Marxist Review Vol4 no2 p 96
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- 36 L Trotsky; Social Democracy and the Wars of Intervention in Russia 1918-1921 (Between Red and White) , London, 1975 p94
- 37 N Bukharin and E Preobrazhensky, The ABC of Communism Harmondsworth, pp249-50
- 38 This is the term used by EH Carr.
- 39 V I Lenin; 'Critical Remarks on the National Question?' (1913) CW, Vol 36, Moscow, pp45-47
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