

Marxism and the national question

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The collapse of Stalinism has seen nationalist wars erupt in Yugoslavia and the former USSR. The unity of numerous 'third world' states is also challenged by a new wave of national struggles. Marxism has a rich tradition of analysis on the national question, yet the lie is still repeated that there lies its Achilles' heel.

Dave Stockton looks at the classical period of this analysis

At the close of the twentieth century a new wave of national struggles is sweeping the world. These struggles involve claims for national privilege as well as protests against national oppression. The oppressed of yesterday often become the oppressors of today.

The collapse of the USSR, together with the growing differences between the USA, the EC and Japan over policy for restoring capitalism, has led to a fracturing of former multi-national states along ethnic or national lines by national groupings trapped within them.

Despite the essential internationalism of revolutionary Marxism, the durability and ferocity of national identity and ideologies comes as no surprise to communists, reflecting as it does, the chronic weakness of a class conscious leadership in the international workers' movement.

For over a hundred and fifty years, Marxists have charted the development of nation building, national movements and the multi-faceted ideological self-justifications that accompany them. The roles played by various national groups in the 1848 revolutions in Europe, the claims and counterclaims of various nationalities trapped within the Austro-Hungarian and Tsarist empires up to the First World War—each in turn sparked a debate that provided all the essential tools of analysis and intervention needed today.

Marx and Engels never gave a general rounded definition of a nation. Nevertheless, their whole approach was to treat the nation, not as some primordial category applicable to all epochs, but as a result of socio-economic evolution and, indeed, of revolution.

They saw the nation state as a product of the development of capitalism, a development full of contradictions and far from complete even in their lifetime.

They considered that the expansion and centralisation of commodity production at a national level was a progressive development. They approved of the 'unity of great nations which, if originally brought about by political force, has now become a powerful coefficient of social production'.¹ While they recognised that the bourgeois class was fundamentally a national class, they saw in this the basis of its progressive role in the bourgeois revolutions of the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Yet, as capitalism itself became a fetter on the productive forces, so too would the nation state within which it developed.

In contrast to the bourgeoisie, the proletariat aimed to build an international order and so, from the outset, its methods of struggle and goals had to be thoroughly internationalist, not nationalist. This did not mean, however, that the proletariat no longer faced national tasks.

Capitalism did not solve all the tasks proper to the bourgeois epoch, leaving the proletariat a clean slate on which to work out purely socialist tasks. Marx and Engels defended resolutely what they called "the old democratic and working class tenet" of the "right of the great European nations to self-determination". These nations were Spain, France, Britain, Italy, Germany, Hungary and Poland. Later they were to add other large and "viable" nations.

The notion of "viability" was the recognition that consciousness alone, or some abstract right, were not enough to ensure a nationality the possibility of independent statehood. In a letter to Kautsky in 1882, Engels commented:

"The very first conditions of national existence [are] large numbers and compactness of territory. . . It is historically impossible for a large people to discuss seriously any internal questions as long as its independence is lacking. . . An international movement of the proletariat is in general only possible between independent nations. . . to get rid of national oppression is the basic condition of all healthy and free development." 2 At the same time, they refused to recognise any absolute "principle of nationalities". They refused to recognise . or support the right of eve/} self-proclaimed nationality or ethnic group to secede from the large national or multi-national states. During and after the 1848 revolutions in Europe, they considered this "principle" as a weapon of reaction, utilised by the Russian Tsar and the French Emperor Louis Napoleon, the two main leaders of the counter-revolution in Eastern and Western Europe respectively.

Marx and Engels' perspective was based on support for the three national struggles of Central Europe that were pitted against these reactionary powers-the German unification struggle and the Polish and Hungarian struggles for national liberation. Nothing which undermined these struggles could be supported.

Poland was a state made up not only of Poles but also of Ruthenes (Western Ukrainians) and Lithuanians. Hungary was a state inhabited by millions of Croats, Slovaks and Romanians, among others. If all these nationalities were to secede to form mini-states under the protection of Russia, then Poland and Hungary would become non-viable states.

They would then be unable to defend the democratic and social revolutions in Western and Central Europe by restraining Tsarism within its borders.

Marx saw pan-Slavism and the call for national independence for all the smaller Slav peoples as a tool of reaction. Such a call undermined and split the progressive national struggles against the reactionary states and their allies. Marx and Engels were absolutely right in this recognition that not all national struggles played a progressive role.

For example, the Croats, under their leader, the Ban Jellacic, were in the vanguard of the Habsburg counter-revolution against the Viennese proletariat as well as the Italian and Hungarian national liberation struggles. In the specific context of a European-wide democratic revolutionary struggle against feudal reaction emanating from St Petersburg and, after 1851, from Paris too, the various national movements had to be judged as either progressive or reactionary.³

Marx and Engels hoped that an independent Poland and Hungary would block the road to the military intervention of Tsarism. Then, together with a triumphant revolution in Germany, they would launch a revolutionary war that would break up the reactionary eastern colossus.

This perspective of a revolutionary "world war" was understandable in the mid-nineteenth century, when Britain and France were the only large developed capitalist states which could be said to have completed

their bourgeois revolutions. But a series of events was to shatter these hopes and eventually render this perspective obsolete.

In the first place, the Crimean War revealed just how conservative the British and French ruling classes, now were. The defeat of the Polish rising of 1863 and the compromise (Ausgleich) reached between the Hungarian gentry and the Austrian ruling dynasty in 1867 ended the progressive role of Hungarian and Polish nationalism. The defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871 and the conservative character of the British workers' unions during the 1870s and 1880s held back the internationalism of the most developed and experienced workers' movements.

By 1870, Germany and Italy had completed their nation-state building through "revolutions from above". Added together these events cut the ground away from Marx and Engels' former hopes for the European revolution. Towards the end of the 1860s and throughout the 1870s they cautiously began to modify their perspective and their views on specific national struggles, although this did not mean that they rejected their entire earlier general political framework.

Central to Marx and Engels' re-evaluation of the national question was their changing estimation of Russia. They soon began to notice the development within the Tsarist empire of revolutionary social and political forces that would destroy it. Yet, if Russia was changing from being the socially stagnant, feudal bastion of reaction it had been, if it too was pregnant with revolution, then it might be necessary to modify their attitude to the national struggles of the smaller Slav peoples. Their change of view was neither complete nor systematic but their new positions foreshadowed the change in the Marxist attitude to the self-determination of nations which took place in the Second International.

In 1867, Marx had altered his attitude to Irish independence, Ireland had not figured amongst the "historic nations" in his or Engels' writings in the 1840s or 1850s. It had a very weak bourgeoisie and a woefully under-developed capitalism. But, argued Marx, "Previously, I thought Ireland's separation from England impossible. Now I think it inevitable, although after separation there may come federation." 4 Marx became convinced that:

"Every industrial and commercial centre in England now possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians, The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself.

. , This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite their organisation."

Here, Marx and Engels worked out one central tenet of the proletarian attitude to the national question; namely, that all such oppression obscures class consciousness and obstructs the class struggle of the workers in both the oppressor and the oppressed nation. The former, because they cannot separate their policy from that of their own rulers; the latter, because so long as they have a national grievance they cannot concentrate on the struggle against exploitation.

Therefore, it is the task of the workers of the oppressor nation to fight for the freedom-the right to separate statehood-for the oppressed nation, By this means, the international unity of the working class can be strengthened.

It was at this time that they formulated the dictum which they frequently repeated, and which has become a cornerstone of the Marxist position on the national question-"Any nation that oppresses another forges its

own chains? Marx went on to champion this position in the First International, arguing that "the Irish, as well as other oppressed nationalities" should have their own sections and their own representatives on the General Council.

Engels now thought that an independent Serbian state might even block, rather than extend, Russian influence in the region. Indeed, once Tsarist Russia erupted in revolution, Engels envisaged a national future for the hitherto "historyless" southern Slavs and even for the Ruthenes of Poland. In 1888, he outlined the following perspective:

"To me, the primary condition of the emancipation of the Central and Eastern European nations is the overthrow of Tsarism . . . we shall see the collapse of this fatal power, represented by Bismark. Austria will disintegrate as it will lose the only justification for its existence, i.e., to prevent by its mere existence Tsarism incorporating to itself the scattered nations of the Carpathians and of the Balkans, Poland will come to life again; Little Russia [the Ukraine] will be able to choose its political connections freely; the Romanians, Hungarians and the Southern Slavs will be able to regulate their affairs and their border questions free from foreign interference," 7 It should be noted that Engels' perspectives were conditional on the revolution breaking out in Russia but, nevertheless, his hopes were very different from those of 1848-51:

". . . if a revolution broke out now in Russia, it would spare Europe the calamity of a general war and it would be the beginning of revolution in the whole world." The generalised use of the demand for self-determination for oppressed nations did not enter the Marxist programme until the 1896 London Congress of the Second International. Strongly supported by Karl Kautsky and by the Russian Social Democrats, it was equally strongly contested by Rosa Luxemburg. Both sides to the dispute, however, recognised that Marx and Engels' international perspective had to be changed.

Russia's feudal structures were being increasingly undermined by the growth of capitalism. The same was the case in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Rosa Luxemburg embraced the view that in this new epoch of international capitalism, world market dominated by the major capitalist powers, all national struggles had become utopian.

Kautsky and Lenin drew an alternative conclusion;

that there was no longer any danger of the national struggles of Eastern Europe playing into the hands of Tsarism. Rather, there was the possibility that the national oppression of the Tsarist empire and the growing struggle of the imprisoned peoples against it would be a powerful auxiliary factor in the approaching bourgeois revolution.

Kautsky played an important part in systematising and re-elaborating Marx and Engels' views to fit the new period that was opening in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth. His 1887 study, *The Modern Nationality*, was the first Marxist attempt at a general theory of the national question.

He argued, like Marx, that the emergence of modern nations is a direct result of the fundamental driving forces of the capitalist mode of production-internal markets, common regulations and free wage labour. Moreover:

". . . the concentration and separation of modern societies into national states was one of the most powerful levers of modern economic development." .

However, Kautsky saw another tendency developing out of this very process:

". . . above a certain limit, such separation into national states becomes superfluous and is even a fetter on continued economic development. Kautsky gave enormous emphasis in his analysis to the role of language. He saw the basic tool for uniting all classes into a single nation as a common home-grown language. Thus languages play the role of barometers of the stage of development of the productive forces. Kautsky analysed the past as a process of linguistic consolidation whereby dialects and even pre-existing languages merged and fused.

Moreover, for Kautsky, this was a process that did not stop with the formation of the presently existing nations:

"To the extent that international communications expand, the need is felt for a medium of international communication, a world language. This process would be a result of the eventual development of a world market and an international economy which would in turn lead to an assimilation of nationalities which Kautsky observed as a fundamental tendency within capitalism.

This tendency to assimilation could not, however, be forced by political means. Still less could it be reversed by mainly or purely political means. Kautsky observed that forcible measures, such as Tsarist Russification in Poland, would never obliterate national differences that rested on important differences of economic development.

Even if, as in Ireland, language differences were overcome, widely different economic conditions would continue to sustain national differences. Only deep-going economic homogenisation could lead to complete national assimilation.

Kautsky's economic, territorial and linguistic analysis was generally accepted by Lenin as the basis of his own position and they generally supported one another in their polemics with Rosa Luxemburg and the Austro-Marxists.

Kautsky never gave a general definition of a nation, claiming later that:

"Nationality is a social relation which is modified continuously and which under different circumstances has a very different meaning; it is a Proteus which slides through our fingers when we try to seize it. Or again:

"Nation is a social formation difficult to apprehend, a product of social development, that rules have never been able to transform into a precisely defined social organism. 12

Kautsky also contributed to the Marxist discussion on the solution to the national question in Eastern and South Eastern Europe. He introduced or, rather, systematised, a distinction between nations and ethnic communities.

According to him, nations were sizeable, cohesive communities that had developed, or were rapidly developing, on the basis of capitalist economy. Ethnic communities were entities whose evolution into independent statehood encountered serious obstacles because of territorial fragmentation, small size, backward economic development or lack of cohesion.

Clearly Kautsky's homeland, Austria, was a case in point. Kautsky was very influential in the drawing up of Austrian Social Democracy's 'Brno Programme' in 1899. This proclaimed its goal as a 'democratic federation of nationalities' with guaranteed protection of national minorities within each autonomous unit.

Kautsky was to promote the goal of federation several times in the new century. In his article, 'The

National Question in Russia? (1905), he argued for the slogan of a "United States of Russia" based on territorial autonomy for all the nationalities of the Tsarist empire.

In 1909, with respect to the Balkan nationalities, he raised the demand of a "Democratic Balkan Federation" a slogan supported by Trotsky and the Romanian revolutionary Christian Rakovsky. Last, but not least, Kautsky, faced with the heightened tensions of the pre-war period in Europe, raised the slogan of a "United States of Europe".

In retrospect, whilst Kautsky's "historical-economic" approach was relatively fruitful and materialist, it had important weaknesses. It was developed on the eve of the new wave of nationalisms that grew rapidly between the 1905 Revolution and the First World War.

This wave was felt not only in Eastern Europe but also in Latin America and Asia, with the Mexican, Turkish, Persian and Chinese revolutions. Imperialism provoked vast oppressed and super-exploited populations to struggle against it and the banner they took up was that of national rights.

Kautsky, on the other hand, overstressed the tendency to the assimilation of nations under the impact of the development of the world economy. He optimistically thought that this would lead to the rapid development of proletarian internationalist consciousness.

In what was a characteristic feature of the rest of Kautsky's work, this view betrayed the lack of a profound grasp of the dialectic of development, of the way that the struggle against national oppression could hasten the growth and differentiation along class lines of proletarian forces in the colonial and semi-colonial world.

What Kautsky was unable to foresee and welcome, Lenin, initially his pupil, was able to develop into an analysis far richer than that of his former teacher.

Rosa Luxemburg was the founder of the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland (SDKP). She rejected Marx and Engels' lifelong support for Polish independence and Karl Kautsky's continued espousal of this cause.

At the London Congress of the Second International in 1896, Luxemburg opposed its support of the self-determination slogan. She said that the proletariat should not be drawn into a "series of sterile national struggles", citing those of the Czechs, the Irish and of Alsace-Lorraine.

In her 1898 study, *The Industrial Development of Poland*, Luxemburg argued that Poland had been decisively integrated into the Tsarist empire by economic development.

Neither the Polish bourgeoisie nor the growing Polish proletariat had any interest in restoring an independent Polish state. Only the shattered remnants of the old gentry, the despairing petit bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia were still nationalist. Their project had "not only a utopian but also a reactionary character".

The repeated attempts to unify all the Social Democrats of the Tsarist empire meant that Luxemburg and Lenin's views on the national question were bound to clash. At the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) in 1903, the Polish Social Democrats opposed the pledge to self-determination within the programme (Clause Nine) and walked out when their advice was not heeded.

Again, at the 1908 Congress, Lenin vigorously defended Clause Nine and emphasised how important the right to secede was in winning the trust of the workers and peasants of the minority nationalities. Lenin increasingly believed that a correct attitude to the national question was, like the agrarian question, vital to

the proletariat during the bourgeois revolution.

Luxemburg's major work, *The National Question and Autonomy* (1908), argued that the general right to self-determination was an abstract and metaphysical right, like the "right to work" or the "right of every man to eat off gold plates". The independence of most small nations ran against the laws of economic development and would be reactionary, certainly in the case of Poland.

Luxemburg argued on the basis of the strongly economically reductionist logic of her views on the national question in the Balkans, where the hopeless backwardness of the Ottoman Empire made the struggles of the more economically advanced Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians and the Armenians progressive.

In these circumstances, she argued, their secession was, indeed, desirable. It should not be assumed, however, that Rosa Luxemburg ignored or downplayed Tsarist oppression of Poland. Against it, she advanced the demand for autonomy but not secession.

The weaknesses of her positions on the national question lay in a strong economistic tendency. She stressed, in a very unilinear way, that capitalist economic development, once it transcended the bounds of the petty territories of small nationalities, doomed these nationalities to a fruitless struggle. Their bourgeoisie, the natural bearer of the national banner, would inevitably and decisively desert it, leaving only reactionary classes as its champions.

All this ignored the profoundly contradictory course of capitalist development itself, its uneven (and combined) character that might make the bourgeoisie return to national demands. She also ignored the fact that the petit bourgeoisie was, as a class, the constant source of new layers of aspiring capitalists.

But, most importantly, Luxemburg ignored the fact that common national, linguistic and cultural (including religious) oppression could weld the classes of a nation together in a common experience of oppression convincing the masses that separation was the only solution.

Lenin argued that Luxemburg was plain wrong to compare the right of self-determination of nations to the right of "gold plates for everyone" or "work for all". These latter demands clash with the essential economic nature of capitalism. The right of self-determination, however, was a key democratic right, one not in flat contradiction to the very nature of capitalism.

Moreover, the working class needed to use democratic rights to extend its power within capitalism and, therefore, it had to fight for them. If the working class did not take the lead in this fight then other classes—the bourgeoisie and the petit bourgeoisie—would. Lenin repeatedly pointed out that Luxemburg's arguments should lead her to reject all democratic rights in favour only of class rights, of specifically workers' rights.

The pre-1914 Habsburg and Romanov empires were, as multi-national entities, the key focus of the national question for the Marxists of the time. Austrian Social Democracy operated in a state which had upwards of 15 different nationalities, of which two, the Austro-Germans (23.9% of the population) and the Hungarians (20.2%), were ruling nations over the two autonomous halves of the empire. The Polish and Croat nobility also had considerable power in their regions.

The major oppressed peoples were the Czechs, Slovenes and Ruthenes in Austria, and the Slovaks, Serbs and Romanians in Hungary. In addition, there were Serbs, Croats and Muslims in the jointly administered Bosnia Herzegovina. The Jewish population, especially the economic and political refugees from the east (Russia and Austrian Galicia and Bukovina) were the target of anti-Semitic "direct action" by the Christian Social Movement and the German Radicals' student following.

Austrian Social Democracy's position on the national question was developed in its definitive form at the Brno I (Brunn) Congress of 1899. It resolved that the empire should be transformed into a federal state of nationalities. These nationalities should have autonomy within their self-governing areas and scattered regions should be formed into a joint national union. The rights of minorities should be legally protected and there should be no privileges for anyone nationality, including no official state language.¹⁴

The 'Brno Programme' outlined a federal, territorial solution, similar in some respects to that adopted in the USSR after 1922 or in Yugoslavia after 1945. However, it did also assert that the national question was 'first of all a cultural demand'. The implication was that the authorities for the autonomous areas would concern themselves mainly with questions of language, schooling and culture. The central, federal government would be responsible for social legislation and regulating economic life.

The actual proposal for personal national-cultural autonomy, whilst it originated with Etbin Kristan, a Slovene delegate at Brno, was theoretically elaborated by Karl Renner.¹⁸ Renner's explicit aim was to 'replace the political struggle of the nationalities for power with the orderly procedure of court and parliamentary transactions'. Renner, a civil servant in the Habsburg state machine, and with mental horizons to match, narrowly focused on the 'legal concept of nation'. He openly espoused 'separating the national groups' cultural and educational life from that of the state and the economy'.¹⁸ With a complacently positive attitude to his homeland he went on to recommend to the restive nationalities that they stay within the Habsburg dynastic frontiers:

"Once the nations are free from the state in national affairs, then there is no better home for them than this Danube state."¹⁷ But, for Renner, this could only be done on an individual basis. Indeed, his definition of a nation stressed that:

"The nation is an association of persons of common thoughts and common language, a cultural community of modern people who are no longer bound to the soil."¹⁸

He insisted that the nation was an association of persons (ein Personenverband): 'Nothing can decide national affiliation but the nationality declaration of the individual freely made in front of the competent authorities.'¹⁹

This right must exist extra-territorially for all who registered. The German in Bohemia or the Czech in Vienna would be able to attend their own schools and cultural institutions, be taught or entertained in their own language. The strictly non national central state institutions should be left to deal with military, police, judicial, fiscal and monetary matters.

This, Renner believed, would syphon off nationality concerns, leaving the parliament to trouble itself with social reform. He remained convinced that the 'territorial principle can never bring compromise and equal rights, it can only bring with it struggle and oppression because its essence is domination'.^{3D}

Renner, together with Max Adler, Otto Bauer and Rudolf Hilferding, was a leading figure in the Austro-Marxist school grouped around the journal *Der Kampf* from 1907 onwards. This school rejected what it called materialist metaphysics, which they defined as 'the privileging of economic over social relations'.

It attacked the predominant Kautskyian 'economic determinism' in the Second International which sought the ultimate origins of all social phenomena in the development of the relations of production. Indeed, Adler rejected historical materialism outright, claiming that Marxism is a 'sociological' theory, a theory of 'social processes' which insisted on the irreducibility of social consciousness to an economic base.

This method was, in fact, subjectivist and non-materialist for all its emphasis on the 'social' and the

"collective". It lay at the heart of all the Austro-Marxist work on the national question and was the basis of Bauer's assertion of the irreducibility (and eternity) of national consciousness.

This idea is once again important because Bauer's work is at present undergoing a highly favourable "re-evaluation" by Marxists and non-Marxists alike as "Leninist" is seen as discredited on the national question, as on much else, in the wake of the collapse of Stalinism at Renner and, following him, Otto Bauer, went on to make an eclectic separation between the sphere of social consciousness in which national culture was located, and the economic sphere.

They recognised the state-wide and, indeed, international, scope of economic development, and from this deduced the necessity of opposing the subdivision of these states (especially Austria-Hungary), and of eventually achieving a union of these states.

Moreover, they went on from this to split the national question off from the sphere of politics and the state. Renner did this most radically. This split, between the economic political and the social-cultural, was the ground from which the ideas of national cultural autonomy sprang.

Otto Bauer defined the nation as a community (Gemeinschaft), one which experiences the "common reciprocal interaction" of its individuals and which, in turn, replicates itself in the national identity of each individual. Distinctive traits are laid down by a common history over a long period and these make each individual within the nation spontaneously recognise the common identity they share with their compatriots. This applies to all classes, to the totality of associated individuals.

Of course, Bauer did not deny that a common economic condition (i.e. exploitation) was the basis for uniting workers of different nations and for dividing them from "their own bourgeoisie". But he saw this simply as just one more identity which every individual possesses alongside family, regional and sex-gender identities.

Bauer did not hold an a-historical, formalist view of national character. He believed that it had material, economic and social roots that changed over time. Nations were of considerable antiquity but passed through many transformations with changes in the modes of production. Thus, the German nation existed in a primitive Gentile form at the time of the Romans, but this underwent repeated radical changes and transformations with the development of feudalism and capitalism.

In general, the existence of class domination and exploitation resulted in the exclusion of the dominated and exploited classes from the national community and national consciousness. Modern social revolutions, however, broadened the social classes that felt themselves part of, and participated in, the national culture. This process of admission could never be complete so long as capitalism persisted and only socialism would resolve it. Then the proletariat would become truly and completely national.

Bauer's definition of the essence of the nation, therefore, combined all of these elements:

"The nation is the totality of men bound together through a common destiny into a community of character."²² This definition subordinated, and relegated to a second order, the question of antagonistic classes, economic relations, the state, language and territory. At the same time, it elevated common psychological and cultural make-up to the first rank. Far from resolving the national question, by removing national oppression and, thereby, removing an obstacle to proletarian unity, Bauer inscribed on his banner the goal of cementing national unity.

Under capitalism, Bauer supported Renner's non-territorial principle (i.e. non-secession). He consequently favoured the preservation of national-cultural differences and with them the hegemony of bourgeois and

petit bourgeois forces over the proletariat. Socialist strategy was limited to the parliamentary struggle for social reforms and the trade union struggle for economic advancement.

This strategy left Austrian Social Democracy loyally supporting the state. No wonder Emperor Franz Joseph could remark that there were only two forces holding his empire together in the years immediately before the outbreak of the First World War-"My army and my Social Democrats".

In February 1913 J V Stalin arrived in Vienna to work with Lenin and other Bolsheviks on a polemical pamphlet aimed at those who had taken up Renner and Bauer's "national-cultural autonomy" slogan. The Bund-the General

Jewish Workers' Union of Lithuania, Poland and Russia was among them. At the Second Congress of the RSDLP, in 1903, the Bund had demanded to be admitted to a federal party as the sole representative of Jewish workers, wherever they were located in the Tsarist empire. Lenin and the Iskra faction rejected this on the grounds that it "sanctions segregation and alienation, elevates them into a principle, a law" which would be equally bad for Jewish and Russian workers.

Lenin believed that a unified, centralised party was necessary to fight the unified, centralised Tsarist state. In addition, factional fragmentation left the Mensheviks very strong in Georgia. The Bolsheviks who, from the Prague Conference (1912), were trying to reconstruct the party on a democratic-centralist basis against the "Liquidators" and the "Conciliators", were obliged to fight all attempts to turn the party into a federation of national parties. Lenin was naturally pleased, therefore, to enrol "a splendid Georgian" in the task of combating nationalism and decentralisation.

Stalin's "Marxism and the National Question" was, as Trotsky said, "his most important. . . rather his only theoretical work".²⁴

Nevertheless, Stalin's classic definition, ". . . a nation is a historically formed stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make up manifested in a common culture" ²⁵ was, Trotsky said, a "theoretically correct and practically fruitful":¹⁸ answer to the problem since it pointed to a solution founded on a territorial and political basis.

It is theoretically correct because it locates the birth of nations in the epoch of a definite mode of production before it goes on to identify further specific historical and ideological determinants. It is practically fruitful because it goes on to champion a consistently democratic solution (self-determination up to and including separation) which actually promotes the development of the class struggle.

This starting point promotes democratic measures which facilitate the political and economic emancipation of the toilers and liquidate at one and the same time all forms of national oppression which obscure the proletariat's understanding of its exploitation. Stalin actually suggests that the best solution might be "the autonomies of such self-determined units as Poland, Lithuania, the Ukraine, the Caucasus", but this would only be achievable if the real Russian proletariat fought for these nations to be able to make their own unhampered decision about it.

Stalin's project started with discussions in Cracow with Lenin. Then he moved to Vienna where Bukharin played an important role. Since Stalin could not read German, Bukharin did most of the reading, selected and translated the key quotes and explained the argumentation of Bauer and others to Stalin. Under such circumstances it is very likely indeed that a good deal of Bukharin's method and views found their way into Stalin's text. Trotsky was later to observe that "the logical construction of the article, not devoid of pedantry, is due most likely to the influence of Bukharin, who inclined to professorial ways".²⁷

Bukharin was greatly attracted to bourgeois sociological theory. This had an effect on his methodology.

Lenin said in his "Testament": "There is something scholastic about him, he has never made a study of dialectics, and, I think never understood it." 28 This weakness, in the form of an eclectic combination of elements, was part of Bukharin's "contribution" to Stalin's work. On the national question, Bukharin was also clearly impressed by Bauer's emphasis on psychology and culture and it was doubtless due to him that these "factors" found their way into Stalin's famous definition. There was even a whiff of Bauer in the proviso that a nation was a "historically constituted stable community".

These elements taken from Bauer were indeed combined with the need for a common territory, economic life and language. But their mode of combination had a checklist character. Which elements are prior, which generate the others, what are the contradictory relations between them;

these questions were not tackled. The eclectic character of this combination was made wooden and dogmatic by the addendum:

"It must be emphasised that none of the above characteristics taken separately is sufficient to define a nation. More than that, it is sufficient for a single one of these characteristics to be lacking and the nation ceases to be a nation, it is only when all these characteristics are present together that we have a nation." 28

This encouraged a normative, check-list, approach to the characteristics of a nation. Many nations or nationalities would have to be, or have been, denied recognition on the basis of this. Stalin himself ruled out the Jews. Lenin, on the other hand, referred to the Jews as "the most oppressed and persecuted nation in Russia".

Lenin also explicitly asserted that every "national culture" was, in fact, a contradictory whole, with "elements of democratic and socialist culture" alongside of, and subordinated by, a "dominant bourgeois culture". Therefore, the "general national culture is that of the landlords and the bourgeoisie" and even of the clergy in many cases. On these, and many other questions, there were differences with Lenin, who himself never offered a definition of a nation in any of his works and warned repeatedly that a very concrete analysis had to be made of each national question. 30

Lenin based himself firmly on Marx and Kautsky. He located the national question firmly in the development of capitalism:

". . . the national state is the form most suited to present day conditions, the capitalist, civilised, economically progressive conditions, as distinguished from medieval, "pre-capitalist conditions). It is the form in which the state can best fulfil its tasks." at Lenin, like Kautsky, insisted that this was also a political question since it dealt first and foremost with the form of the state. Lenin argued against Rosa Luxemburg's claim that economic interdependence made self-determination a utopia.

Against Bauer and the Bund's position that the national question was primarily one of culture and psychology, Lenin insisted that the national question was first and foremost a political question.

Lenin said that the dominance of small countries by the big capitalist "imperialist powers" no more made the right to self-determination redundant than big capital's domination of the state and parliament made electoral rights and freedoms useless, On the contrary, Lenin pointed out that imperialism had the effect of broadening national struggles beyond Europe onto the world stage:

", , , capitalism having awakened Asia, has called forth national movements everywhere in that continent

too; that this tendency is towards the creation of nation states in Asia.³² Indeed, it was within the state that successfully defended its independence in the 1860s and 1870s—apart from capitalism had developed the fastest. In a thoroughly dialectical way, which developed and transcended the work of Marx, Engels and Kautsky, Lenin argued that there were two historic periods in the development of capitalism, period which, however, co-existed and overlapped in different parts of the globe.

In "Critical Remarks on the National Question" (1913) he analysed two tendencies as being at work within capitalism; first, a drive to the creation of national states and, secondly, a tendency to obliterate national peculiarities by means of the world market. The first tendency predominates over the second in the period of capitalism's youth. The second comes to dominate the first during capitalism's maturity, demonstrating thereby its ripeness for socialism.

However, capitalism had not developed evenly over the globe. Whilst the second stage was largely completed in Western Europe and North America by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it was far from complete, indeed had only just begun, in Eastern Europe, Russia and in Asia in the first years of the twentieth.

In the first phase, as had been the case in countries like Germany and Italy, mass national democratic movements had arisen. This self-same process was now to be seen not only in the underdeveloped parts of Europe but in Mexico, China, India and the Philippines. Meanwhile, in the developed states the national question now had little or no progressive role because there was "a highly developed antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie".

Luxemburg's mistake was to lose sight of the difference between states where this process was complete and those where it was not. In Tsarist Russia the immediate task was now the destruction of the Tsarist dictatorship. In this task the small minority of workers (10% of the population) required allies—the peasantry and the oppressed nationalities.

These nationalities could include the petit bourgeoisie, and even the bourgeoisie if they were fighting Tsarism. The proletariat still faced a whole series of bourgeois democratic tasks, and for them to be achieved the proletariat had to be the leader in this revolution.

For this reason, and not simply as a disguise to evade censorship, Lenin called the Bolsheviks "consistent democrats". As such they had to be ardent fighters against all forms of national oppression, of all coercion. Lenin stated:

"Insofar as the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation fights the oppressor, we are always in every case and more strongly than anyone else in favour for we are the staunchest and the most consistent enemies of oppression."³³ He continued, in a direct challenge to Rosa Luxemburg's accusation that this meant supporting the bourgeoisie:

"The bourgeois nationalism of any oppressed nation has a general democratic content that is directed against oppression and it is this content that we unconditionally support." Of course, the proletariat could not support all its aspirations unconditionally, could not support national exclusiveness, the oppression of other minorities within the oppressed nations and so on. Hence the need for the slogan of self-determination.

The question of self-determination, Lenin insisted, "belongs wholly and exclusively to the sphere of political democracy", that is, to the realm of the unhindered right to secede and establish an independent state.

Against Rosa Luxemburg, he objected that autonomy, which might well be a correct democratic arrangement similar in kind though much greater in scope to democratic municipal and local government—was not the same thing as the recognition of complete sovereignty for the oppressed people. Marxists favoured autonomy in many concrete circumstances, but it was not a right. The only consistent right in the national sphere was the sovereign right to decide whether to secede or not. Lenin combined this staunch defence of the oppressed nations with a no less firm insistence that Marxism is opposed to all nationalist ideology permeating or seeking to influence the proletariat.

Marxists have no positive interest in creating or preserving the 'national peculiarities' of peoples except inasmuch as they contribute to the common cultural and scientific treasury of a future classless and nationless humanity.

The strategic goal of Marxists is not the proliferation and separation of nations but their merging and, indeed, their ultimate disappearance. Marxists are opposed to the slightest forcible or coercive assimilation into the national identity of a large oppressor nation. But we are also opposed to artificial attempts to hold up or reverse the spontaneous and voluntary assimilation process that is a feature of capitalism and will be even more marked under the proletarian dictatorship and transition to socialism.

Lenin was an implacable opponent of the Bauer solution which maintained and promoted national consciousness, culture and a cross-class identity, and yet simultaneously avoided a democratic answer to enforced retention within the boundaries of another state and denial of the right to secede. Lenin insisted that supporting the right to secede was not at all the same as advocating that every nation concerned should secede. Lenin used the analogy of the right to divorce; to advocate the right is not synonymous with advocating it in any specific case.

Indeed, Lenin saw the right of nations to self-determination as a means of holding large states, even multiethnic states, together. In his polemics, he never voiced any objection to the SDLP's rejection of secession for Poland.

He merely objected to their attempts to remove the right to such secession from the All-Russian Empire party programme.

He shared with Luxemburg the objective of an immediate common struggle for the democratic and the socialist revolution by the Polish and Russian workers. Both Lenin and Luxemburg recognised that secession of nations was in itself an evil since it always to some degree separates proletariats, divides the forces of the labour movement and hampers the development of the productive forces. But, for Lenin, even all these consequences were a lesser evil than coercive or forcible union. This could only poison the relations between the proletariats of the nations concerned by making the oppressed workers identify their oppression as originating from all classes of the oppressor nation.

Recognition of this right, for Lenin, also carried the obligation to assist the oppressed nation to carry out this right, that is, to establish in a democratic manner what really is the will of the majority of the nation concerned. When this will is established beyond doubt, then it is the duty of revolutionaries of the oppressor nation to practically aid the oppressed to secede.

We have seen how what was to become the Marxist position on the national question developed over the period between 1848 and 1914. Marx and Engels laid down the basic concepts of the nation state as a typical product of the bourgeois epoch. They held from the beginning the view that those large viable national units in which capitalism had developed or was developing, deserved, indeed needed, political independence.

Their attitude to other national claims was subordinated to the perspective for the completion of the bourgeois democratic revolution which formed the core of their perspectives for thirty years after 1848. However, they also began, especially in their writings on Ireland, to lay down a more general appreciation of what the workers' tactics should be when faced with national oppression.

They formulated their dictum "any nation that oppresses another forges its own chains". Their specific conclusion was that a proletariat which does not fight the national oppression visited by its own bourgeoisie upon another people would never be able to emancipate itself from this self-same class. It was for the Second International and, in particular, the trend represented at first by Kautsky and later by Lenin, to develop fully the position on the right of all oppressed peoples to self-determination. The rich debate with the "cultural-psychological school" helped the development of the qualitatively superior Leninist position.

It is no accident that those who wish to reject Lenin's position have to return to Luxemburg or Bauer. But Lenin's basic approach, rooting all linguistic, cultural and ideological attributes in the growth of bourgeois and petit bourgeois classes on the basis of capitalist property relations, is vastly superior theoretically to all subjectivist theories.

On the basis of this approach, we can provisionally offer the following definition of what constitutes a nation:

A nation is made up of antagonistic classes under the hegemony of the bourgeoisie or its agents. It is based on the possession of, or aspiration to gain, sovereign control of a territory on which to organise its economic, social and political life. Its component classes must share a common written and verbal means of communication, (language or languages). On the basis of real and/or mythologised common historical origins, the dominant class and its agents reproduce a national consciousness (which has a psychological, cultural as well as a political component).

Such a definition must not, however, be understood normatively. That is to say, we do not suggest that if a given claimant to nationhood lacks one or more of these characteristics then it is not a nation and, consequently, forfeits the rights appropriate to one. This is the method of Stalinism, liberalism and sectarianism.

Since nations come into being in struggle, it is very likely that, in many concrete cases, important elements of nationhood should indeed be lacking and are only objects of aspiration. Nations are the product of real social struggles in concrete historical periods.

They are also the product of the entire bourgeois epoch (from the transition from pre-capitalist society to the transition to socialism). Thus, nations could exist before the bourgeoisie gained political power and after it had lost it in any single country. .

At the same time, Lenin's approach-which, we are convinced, informs the definition offered above-is welded to a fruitful tactical and strategic practice for the proletariat. It aids all genuinely democratic struggles for national liberation where these represent the will of the majority of the nation concerned.

Of course, no one tactic alone can conquer the influence of the most powerful and specific ideology of the bourgeois epoch. But, support for the right of oppressed nations to self-determination does undermine bourgeois nationalism and promote proletarian internationalism.

Myth and Reality in the genesis of nations

The endless multiplication of nation states or of states claiming to be nation states in the twentieth century

is cited in evidence of the universality and the natural character of nations. Nations may not always have existed, goes the argument, but they are the highest possible stage of the human community.

A world of nations is, alongside capitalism and parliamentary democracy, part of the "end of history". But the twentieth century has not just seen a stable and harmonious pattern of nation formation on the West European model.

Rather, they have come into existence through bloody conflict, either in the fight against national oppression or for national privileges.

The attempt to portray nations as natural and eternal is part of an attempt to disguise the class motives that give rise to the struggle for statehood. Yet nation states—"the typical normal state form for the capitalist period"—according to Lenin, were a new phenomenon in human history.

The bourgeoisie can never present them as such. From its earliest days as a class it had to present nations as a rebirth of something which had up to that point been divided, usurped and obscured by feudalism or dynastic absolutism.

But the economic, social, political and legal basis on which it created these states was fundamentally new. In some cases (France) it was able to build on the work begun by enlightened despotism, which was a regime obliged to rest partly on the support of the nascent bourgeoisie and thus to carry out some of the latter's tasks.

The French Revolution did not have to smash the absolutist state but rather purge it of its feudal elements and complete the development of a centralised army, state bureaucracy and a uniform system of national administration.

Unlike the monarchs and the nobility this upstart class of merchants, lawyers and manufacturers could not claim to derive their power either from ancient custom, from royal descent or from God.

Since it was plain that they had acquired their power by revolutions made by the subordinate and exploited classes they had to acknowledge this in some way and maintain that all political power derived from the people, that is, the Nation, of which they were now the leading and representative part. The state thus had to express the sovereignty of the nation. In turn, its citizens had to be patriots.

Thus citizenship is supposed to be more or less identical with membership of the national community; namely, all those speaking the national language, sharing its distinctive national culture, possessing its "national character".

Yet this community was defined by bourgeois ideologists in two different ways, although pragmatic combinations of these are frequent.

The first stresses the historic, the organic and the emotional. For German nationalists of the Fichte type the territory of the nation is itself a part of its physical, corporeal identity.

The nation is "blood and soil". Nations can no more be moved from one territory to another than persons can be moved from one body to another.

This view is based on a refusal to see the nation as a social entity but rather to insist that it is an organism like a plant, an animal or an individual human being. It is anti-rational, insisting on the sacredness of the homeland, its inalienability. It is the basis for claiming and recovering "lost" national territory, inhabited by another people, perhaps for centuries or millenia (e.g. Serbian claims to Kosovo, Zionist claims to Eretz

Israel).

The second approach treated the nation as a social contract from which the citizen received liberty in return for patriotic devotion. The Jacobins adopted the view that "a nation is a daily plebiscite" and "the people without liberty has no patrie".

Many nations claim a longevity much greater than the epoch of the bourgeois revolutions. In Europe these claims are often rooted in the period of the establishment of barbarian kingdoms on the ruins of the western provinces of the Roman Empire. Suitable figures are co-opted as national unifiers (Alfred the Great for England, Clovis for the French).

With the disintegration of the USSR the people in Mongolia are now "discovering" that Ghengis Khan was the father of their "nation" in the twelfth century. Also pressed into the service of the national myth-makers is the epic poetry of these and even older periods.

Sometimes religious Ideology and history also plays a part.

These legendary origins were, however, not originally national myths but tribal, religious and dynastic myths, stories of ruling houses from the Dark and Middle Ages.

In a period that stretches roughly from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century these ancient myths were converted into national myths.

Amongst the more recently formed nations of the twentieth century a similar process has occurred but over a much shorter time, making the "artificiality" of this process much more visible. National myth-making is a task of poets, dramatists historians, and latterly of film makers and novelists.

For a modern national consciousness to be established by the bourgeoisie, these "ethnic" origins, real, mythological or a mixture of the two, play an essential role. A nation has to have a historic dimension-the "community of fate" of the classic definitions of the nation.

This can relate to the actual history of the ancestors of the current population, the cultural achievements of previous inhabitants, the history of the colonisers of a given territory, the religious community and culture of its people. The national myth-makers treat these ideologies as an independent driving force. They do so in order to displace and obscure the real class motive forces which led to the formation of the nation.

Modern Jewish nationalism (including Zionism) has to transform the religious history of the Jewish merchant/artisan centred communities into the history of a 3,000 year old nation.

Religious ideology has played an important part in the nationalism of oppressed nations like the Poles and the Irish. It remains a resource for nation creators or dividers as in the Indian subcontinent. Likewise, tribal-confederation identities (Africa) can serve as a starting point for nation creating.

The existence of "ancient nations" in the distant past, (e.g. the ancient Egyptians, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Chinese, Aztecs, Incas) in no way proves the millennia long existence of nations.

Whilst geographical compactness and linguistic homogeneity may have given them a conscious ethnic distinctness the slightest acquaintance with their history reveals the ideological basis of the state and the common consciousness of its people was not based on national identity, let alone the concept of the sovereignty of the nation.

Hence the complete absence in these epochs of such a concept as the right of nations to Independent

statehood. If this reflection within right/law was completely absent this is because the socioeconomic reality which might lead to it was also absent.

NOTES

1 K Marx and F Engels, "Civil War in France", Selected Works, London 1970, p289

2 Letter from Engels to Kautsky 2 February 1882, cited in "Nationalism and Socialism", Horace B Davis, Monthly Review, New York 1967, p17

3 We do not have the space here to deal with the much discussed question of Engels' writings in 1848-49 on the theory of the "non-historic" peoples. We hope to do so in a future issue of Trotskyist International. But, whether or not this theory had, or has, a valid place within Marxism, Marx and Engels were certainly right that no absolute progressive character could be given to all national claims and aspirations, divorced from their international political context.

4 K Marx, Letter to Engels 2 November 1867, Marx and Engels on Ireland, Moscow 1971, p141

5. K Marx, Letter to S Meyer and A Vogt, 8 April 1870, *ibid* pp292-295

6. K Marx, Collected Works Vol 21, Moscow 1985, pt 20

7. F Engels, Letter to Ion Nadeji, 4 January 1888, cited in I Cummings, Marx and Engels and National Movements, London 1980

8 Reproduced in G Haupt, M Lowy and C Weil, Les Marxistes et la Question Nationale, Paris 1974

9 *Ibid*, p119

10 *Ibid*, p121

11 K Kautsky, "Nationality and Internationality" (1908), *ibid*, p136

12 *Ibid*

13 K. Kautsky, "The National Tasks of Socialists Among the Balkan Slavs", cited in Renaldo Munck, The Difficult Dialogue. London 1986, pp32-33

14 E Nimmi, Marxism and Nationalism, London 1991, p129

15 Lenin and Stalin were thus mistaken in ascribing to the Brno Programme the position of "national-cultural autonomy".

16 Cited in J Schwarzmantel, Socialism and the Idea of the Nation, London 1991, p154

17 *Ibid*, p156

18 *Ibid*

19 *Ibid*

20 *Ibid*

21 See for example, E Nimmi, *op cit*

22 Otto Bauer, "The Nationality Question and Social Democracy", reproduced in Bottomore and Goode (eds), Austro-Marxism, Oxford 1978, p107

23 In practice, however, degrees of autonomy did exist within the RSDLP.

During the decade after 1902 Polish, Latvian and Finnish Social Democrats-often Lenin's allies were semi or completely independent parties for whole periods.

24 L Trotsky, Stalin Vol 1, London 1968, p235

25 J Stalin, Works Vol 2, Moscow 1953, p307

26 L Trotsky, *ibid*

27 *Ibid*

28 V I Lenin, Selected Works Vol 13, Moscow 1971, p741. Within two years (1916) Bukharin was engaged in a very fierce polemic with Lenin on the national question, claiming, like Rosa Luxemburg, that imperialism had become such a total world system that national state independence was a fiction. In the here and now it was an impossibility and under socialism it would be unnecessary. Thus, Bukharin claimed that the self-determination slogan was now outmoded. Throughout these later debates, which indeed

continued after 1917, Stalin played no role.

29 J V Stalin, Works Vol 2, p307

30 Lenin never thereafter made any explicit reference to Stalin's pamphlet or its famous definition.

31 Lenin, Questions 01 National Policy and Proletarian Internationalism, Moscow 1970, p47

32 Ibid, p49

33 Ibid

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