The National Question

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Dave Stockton looks at the National question in South Africa

The National Question is probably the most extensively debated issue of the South African revolution. This is because it has become the central ideological question for all the contending parties.

For the white racists their multi-national and multiracial theory is central, both to the maintenance of their rule over the black majority through splitting it into a series of minorities? and to a justification of it to the ?public opinion? within the imperialist democracies. To this end the whites have attempted to consolidate the old ?native reserves? into ?homelands? for the so-called nations; Zulu, Tswana, Sotho and so on.

These linguistic and cultural groupings owe their origins to the consolidation and creation of Bantu kingdoms during the great period of upheaval, war and migration in the early Nineteenth century. This was known as the Mfecane (the crushing?) among the Zulu or the Difaqane (?forced migration?) amongst the Sotho. In this period, the cattle raising Bantu tribes were led by figures such as King Shaka, who founded the powerful and expansive Zulu kingdom. King Moshoeshoe founded the Kingdom of Basotho, Mzilikaze that of the Ndebele, Sothangane the Gaza empire.

These states and their peoples had hardly come into existence before they were disrupted by the trek of the Boers and the expansion of the British Cape colony. Economic development in the Twentieth century has thoroughly mixed the peoples of South Africa despite all the attempts of the racists to prevent it.

The apartheid state and the employers have long tried to divide their black workforce by playing upon ?tribal? (in reality linguistic) differences. They have long used the Zulus in particular as policeman in the mine compounds. In addition the Bantustan system has artificially preserved or restored the system of ?chiefs? and ?kings?. This has left a legacy of division which every progressive movement has sought to overcome.

Therefore within the liberation movement - the Congress tradition, the Pan-African tradition, the Black Consciousness Movement and the Unity movement - there have always been compelling reasons to address the National Question. Has South Africa one, two, four or even more nations? Let us look first at the majority tradition, that of the ANC and its Stalinist core.

THE ANC & THE NATIONAL QUESTION

At the heart of the ANC?s and the South African Communist Party?s (SACP) programme is their analysis of South Africa as a ?colonialism of a special type?. Obviously it is the case that every country possesses a unique combination of features in its development. But revolutionaries should always beware of a method that counterposes the exceptional to the general, or the nationally specific to the international. Stalinism, with its multitude of ?national road? programmes, always pleads unique circumstances in order to come to the conclusion that the overthrow of capitalism is not a task of the coming struggle. In common with its counter-revolutionary twin - Social Democracy - it holds that working class power and socialism are a distant and not an immediate goal.

The South African racist state certainly has its origins in colonisation by white settlers and was for a whole epoch a colony of the Dutch and then the British. But South Africa has long been ruled by an indigenous bourgeoisie. To confuse the present situation with colonialism is to mistake the past for the present. In reality, however, this ?mistake?
is not an accidental error on the part of the ANC/SACP theoreticians.

It enables them to give the struggle against apartheid the character of an anti-colonial struggle - just like those that have taken place in all the other states of Africa. What interests the ANC in doing this is the fact that not one of these anti-colonial struggles led to the overthrow of capitalism. They stand in the ANC?'s view as testimony to the separate historic stage? of national independence. Of course the ANC stresses that this colonialism is ?of a special type?: ?What is ?special? or different about the colonial system as it obtains in South Africa is that there is no spatial separation between the colonising power (the white minority state) and the colonised black people . . . . The special features of South Africa?'s internal colonialism are also compounded by the fact that the South African state, parliament and government are juridically independent of any metropolitan country . . . ? (Apartheid South Africa - Colonialism of a Special Type, issued by the ANC)

The 1910 Act of Union, the 1931 Statute of Westminster and the 1961 Declaration of the Republic are not seen as the legal and constitutional reflections of South Africa?'s shedding of its colonial and then semi-colonial status. Rather, they are treated simply as acts of deception. The ANC believes that these juridical formalities should not be allowed to cloud the colonial content of the white supremacist state, and that:

"Flowing from this analysis of the South African racist state as essentially colonial, the South African struggle is an anti-colonialist national liberation struggle."

The means to attain this objective, as in the rest of Africa, is: ?the abolition of the colonial state and the transfer of power to a national government elected by popular suffrage".

Again and again the SACP repeats: ?What needs to be stressed here is that national self-determination, as in all other national liberation struggles, is the decisive issue."

The ANC has altered its position on the national question several times since the SACP?'s rise to dominance within it. But its analysis has always been made to fit both the stages theory and the popular front strategy. The position enshrined in the Freedom Charter reflected the Congress Alliance popular front of the 1950s. The Charter therefore talked of ?national groups?. Later SACP writers spoke of an ?African Nation? in counterposition to the tribalisation attempts of the racist regime, adding to this a ?Coloured nation? and an ?Indian nation?.

After the Morogoro Conference in 1969, heavy stress was placed on the idea of the African nation as the ?majority nation? whose national liberation was to be ?the main content of the present stage of the South African revolution?. The upsurge of the Black Consciousness Movement in the mid-seventies, with its insistence on the unity of the non-white population, plus the effects of the Nationalist Government?'s multi-nation policy designed to minoritise all the black ?nationalities?, obliged the ANC to abandon its own theory of national groups:

"Today both the ANC and the SACP recognise the existence of two nations in South Africa, the oppressed and the oppressor nations . . . ? (Selected Writings on the Freedom Charter 1985)

Yet, even here, the ANC is not consistent. It seeks to limit the nationhood of the whites, elsewhere referring to them as: ?the colonising ?nation?, the white national groups". (?Questions on the National Democratic Revolution.? Sechaba October 1982)

B Molapo writing in African Communist (1977) reveals the reason for clinging to at least a two nation or nationality thesis: ?The great disadvantage of the one-nation thesis is, then, that it obscures the colonial nature of our society and in consequence the national character of our liberation struggle".

The SACP/ANC view of the national liberation struggle against colonialism claims to stand in the tradition of Marx and Lenin. Before we can finally reveal all its errors it is necessary to honestly explain the Marxist position on the National Question.
The classic definition of a nation comes from Stalin's one work of theoretical significance in the history of communism, namely, Marxism and the National Question (1913):

"A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make up manifested in a common culture." (Works Vol 2, p30.)

Trotsky was later to concur with this view;

"This combined definition, compounding the psychological attributes of a nation with the geographic and economic conditions of its development, is not only correct theoretically but also practically fruitful, for then the solution to the problem of each nation's fate must perforce be sought along the lines of changing the material conditions of its existence, beginning with territory." (Leon Trotsky, Stalin vol I, p230.)

The views of Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin were developed in counter position to the subjective-idealist national theory of the Austro Marxists. Otto Bauer in The National Question and Social Democracy (1907) arrived at this definition of a nation; ?The nation is the totality of men bound together through a common destiny with a community of character.? This is an entirely circular description of national consciousness. Elsewhere, Bauer says explicitly that ?a nation exists if its component parts believe it to be a nation'.

Karl Renner - another Austro Marxist - brought out the full idealism and subjectivism of this approach ten years after Bauer's book was written. In 1917 he wrote: ?Long before the nation emerged as a political factor it existed unconsciously as a national character, semi-consciously as national feeling and finally as a clear national consciousness. The feeling, and awareness of the feeling, that someone who has the same language and culture belongs to us, that ?we? are different from ?foreigners? that we have to stand with our own people and against foreigners, is naive nationalism: that primitive, certainly genuine and, in a sense, eternal, impulse in the life of the emotions.? The subjective emotional expression of modern nationalistic ideology is here projected backwards as a cause of the nation's existence and forward as its eternal nature.

This view insists that today's national community is a result of destiny or fate. The nation is locked between an unalterable past and an inevitable future. This thoroughly ahistorical bourgeois approach leads inevitably to the fatal national chauvinism which the Austro-Marxists espoused in the First World War. Against it, Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky defined the nation in materialist terms.

Nevertheless one must make certain criticisms and corrections to Stalin's famous formula. To use it as a check list of characteristics is wrong. Stalin himself erroneously proclaims:

"There is no nation which at one and the same time speaks several languages."

What about Switzerland? It speaks three major languages and several dialects of a minor one and has existed as a nation for centuries. What is important is, firstly, intercommunication and community of culture, not necessarily a single language and secondly absolute equality and absence of privileges. Under these conditions differences of ?mother language? will not be sufficient to split a nation united by economy, culture and history.

A second, more substantial, objection to Stalin's definition is that it deals with being rather than becoming. In other words it is a static categorisation that fits existing nations but cannot grasp a struggle for national existence. The third objection is that, in Stalin's 1913 definition, national culture and psychology or character ignores class differences within the nation. These criticisms are not true of Stalin and Lenin's whole corpus of work on the national question in the years 1912-14, but Stalin's composite definition does have this weakness.

A nation is a community composed of exploiting and exploited classes which has developed within a definite territory on the basis of a common economic life, a common language(s) and a common culture which expresses a conscious
The development of nations must be understood historically. The nation state is the typical state form of the bourgeois epoch. It sweeps away the political and state forms of earlier epochs. Thus, for example, the feudal state with its local or provincial particularisms was based on fiefdoms held together in personal union and transmitted and modified by dynastic means. Its subjects, divided into Orders or Estates, were ruled via a series of privileges (private laws).

Modern nations began to form in the final disintegrating phase of feudalism. National struggles centred on the tasks of unity and independence. Merchant and manufacturing capital sought the formation of a wider arena for the development of exchange and production, free of the multiplicity of customs duties, legal systems, local currencies and arbitrary plunder or extortion by the aristocracy. It sought the freeing of the land from what it regarded as parasites.

In short, capitalism needed an expanded arena for the development of its own productive forces. This necessitated a compact, contiguous bloc of territory, a common language or mutually understood languages as a means of verbal and above all literary communication. It meant the creation of a common economic life based on a uniform currency, weights and measures, external but not internal customs barriers and a uniform legal system. In short, it needed a unified national market.

The ideology of this struggle was nationalism and involved the revolutionary bourgeoisie and its petit-bourgeois allies in the creation of a national culture, with a standardised national language which was a written medium first and foremost, a national education system and a literary culture. All this was enormously progressive as against the remnants of feudalism with its dynastic loyalties, its dialects and its rural idiocy.

Yet, despite the progressive nature of this struggle against all pre-capitalist modes of production, the nation and the nation-state are composed of antagonistic classes. The national state is a state of capitalism’s ruling class. All national culture, though shared by other classes, remains predominantly bourgeois (it has as its purpose the domination over these classes). Of course, such national cultures have democratic and popular elements within them. These elements are contributed from the life and struggles of the urban petit-bourgeoisie, the poor peasantry and the proletariat against their class enemies. But these are either appropriated into the bourgeois national culture in so far as they do not clash with fundamental bourgeois values, or they are subordinated into regional, local or class sub-cultures.

This phase of development was experienced in Europe, North and South America and Japan in capitalism’s earliest and progressive phase. By and large, however, in Africa and Asia large-scale capitalism came with their domination by imperialism - an aggressive external force which trampled on the existing pre-capitalist modes of production, breaking them up militarily and economically. Consequently, modern nationalism was born in these continents as a response to this onslaught, with the petit-bourgeoisie usually having to stand in for a national bourgeoisie that was either very weak or tied to imperialism.

Petit-bourgeois nationalism found itself in conflict with the bourgeoisie and in fear of the class independence of the proletariat. In the colonial and semi-colonial countries it faced the task of unifying states where the productive forces had not developed sufficiently to create national markets, and where the state borders reflected the division imposed by inter-imperialist rivalries. As a result, the peoples of these states were made up of various language groups, often lacking literacy, and with a history of the cynical exploitation of these differences by the imperialist administrators or rival imperialisms from outside.

This has left to the formally independent states of Africa, the Middle East and Asia a legacy of internal and external divisions which have either prevented or stunted the development of a nationalism within these states. They face constant pressure from imperialism. This pressure comes economically from the IMF and the World Bank. Militarily and politically it comes from US and European imperialism either directly or through their minor imperialist stooges and semi-colonial gendarmes. This has led to trans-state nationalisms such as pan-Islamism, pan-Arabism and pan-Africanism. Yet the existing states with their particular history, their economic structure, their culture inherited from capitalist development has made these pan-nationalisms a utopian project, constantly breaking down when faced with
Thus, the national struggles of the oppressed peoples are on the one hand a justified and progressive force against imperialism and against backward feudal, tribal or collaborationist elements within their own states. Yet, as nationalisms, they are utopian in that in the imperialist epoch no prolonged period of national development (on a capitalist basis) is likely to intervene. This utopian nationalism is in addition reactionary wherever it clashes with the development of the working class into a conscious force defending its own interests and seeking to lead the rural poor and the different nations oppressed by imperialism against it.

The attempt to create a pure non-class nationalism or even a ?proletarian nationalism? is a utopian and reactionary project. Lenin and Trotsky?s approach was quite different. Trotsky summed up Lenin?s position on the national question succinctly:

"it was Lenin?s view that the right of self-determination was merely an application of the principles of bourgeois democracy in the sphere of national relations. A full bodied, all-sided democracy under capitalism was unrealisable; in that sense the national independence of small and weak peoples was likewise unrealisable?, However, even under imperialism, the working class did not refuse to fight for democratic rights, including among them the right of each nation to its independent existence. Moreover, in certain portions of our planet it was Imperialism itself that invested the slogan of national self-determination with extraordinary significance.? (Stalin Vol 1 p229)

For Marxists, as opposed to all forms and types of nationalists, the national question which arises from this demands only a consistent and total opposition to all national oppression. It does not oblige the proletarian vanguard to become nation builders. Lenin was quite clear on this question: ?For Marxists the national programme . . advocates firstly the equality of nations and languages and the impermissibility of all privileges in this respect and also the right of nations to self determination . . . secondly the principle of Internationalism and uncompromising struggle against contamination of the proletariat with bourgeois nationalism, even of the most refined? kind.? (Critical Remarks on the National Question)

When Lenin talks of the ?mow refined? nationalism he means that of the oppressed - indeed he refers to that of ?the most oppressed and persecuted nation ? the Jews.". He concludes that: ? . . . it is the Marxist?s bounden duty to stand for the most resolute and consistent democratism on all aspects of the national question,. Its task is largely a negative one. But this is the limit the proletariat can go to in supporting nationalism, for beyond that. begins the ?positive? activity of the bourgeoisie striving to fortify nationalism.? (ibid) The argumentation about how many nations or ?nationalities? or ?national groups? exist in South Africa, while interesting in itself, bears no decisive importance for our programme. What decides the existence or non-existence of nations is not the cognitions of theoreticians or the chop-logic of politicians trying to bolster up artificial stages, but the existence or development of national struggles.

In South Africa, the ?national? question is an aspect of the general democratic revolution, that is, the destruction of the racist dictatorship over all non-white South Africans. Without recognition of this reality all ?nationalisms?, tribalisms or religious community ideologies will play a divisive role in the general democratic struggle. The apartheid state has realised this from the outset, hence its Bantustan and community policies aimed at Balkanising South Africa.

Yet a ?positive? espousal of ?Black Nationalism? or a two nation and even a one nation theory, also disarms the proletariat. The ?national? question par excellence is to end the brutal oppression by, and monstrous privileges of, the whites and to unify the artificially separated people of South Africa. But the proletariat?s programme and its demands cannot stop here. It has to overcome the ?tribalist? ideologies of the Bantustan leaders like Buthelezi here and now and counter the constant attempts of Botha and company to set the linguistic groups and communities at one another?s throats. This means allaying the fears of any language group or community amongst the oppressed that it will be a helpless minority in the new state.

Therefore, the proletariat should make clear that it is fighting for a unified South Africa which is free of all ?racial? or ?national? privilege and oppression. This would mean the free use of all languages in education and cultural life, the
creation of local government which ensures no oppression of one community by another. It would also mean that, whilst the working class, whether under capitalism or under its own dictatorship, needs as large and centralised a state as possible, this must be a voluntarily chosen centralism.

The workers’ party should, therefore, include in its programme for the morrow of the destruction of apartheid, the right of self-determination for all non-oppressor peoples; for all those for whom autonomy or even separate statehood would not mean oppression for another people. This programme alone enables the working class to assemble around it all the oppressed peoples without succumbing to bourgeois nationalist influence itself.

Seen as Lenin saw it, the question? is not an obstacle to the seizure of power by the proletariat. It does not necessitate a separate national liberation stage as the ANC/SACP claim but is a task of the permanent revolution that will only be fulfilled progressively if the proletariat seizes power. The history of the other African states shows that, where national liberation? installs the bourgeoisie or its military-bonapartist caretakers, this does not solve the question of nationalism, tribalism and separate communities. The bitter and bloody experience of the Congo, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia have shown this. The South African proletariat can and must solve this question - as the Russian proletariat did in 1917 - under its own class rule.

The ANC/SACP’s repeated insistence that national self-determination is the decisive issue is the stance of petit-bourgeois democracy, of nationalism as opposed to proletarian revolution. The apartheid state’s repressive apparatus exists to ensure the super-exploitation of the black proletariat and the exclusion from the land of the great mass of toilers. It is the fight against this unendurable exploitation and oppression that is the main explosive charge of the South African revolution. The masses see democracy - one person one vote - as the means to end this nightmare.

South African Stalinism is a priori wedded to keeping the struggle against apartheid within the limits of a bourgeois revolution. It has subsequently arranged and re-arranged its view of the national question to fit this strategic commitment.

PERMANENT REVOLUTION

Trotsky neither confused the national question nor indeed any other major bourgeois-democratic struggle (the land question, the democratic republic) with the struggle of the proletariat for its own social emancipation. Nor did he draw from their distinction the conclusion that separate historic stages and distinct class rules (dictatorships) were imposed by this fact. If he had conflated bourgeois-democratic and socialist tasks by calling the former socialist he would have thereby been a petit-bourgeois populist, whose socialism? would become an instrument of deception for the proletariat. If he had espoused a stages theory he would have been a Menshevik.

Despite Stalinist slanders, Trotsky was neither. The theory of permanent revolution neither ignores the democratic revolutionary tasks nor confuses them with socialist ones. What this means was expressed by Trotsky quite clearly in the one major article he devoted to South Africa. (On the South African Theses. Writings of Leon Trotsky 1934 35). He stressed heavily the fact of racial and national oppression exercised by the whites;

"The South African possessions of Great Britain form a dominion only from the point of view of the white minority. From the point of the black majority, South Africa is a slave colony".

This gives the starting point, the enormous explosive social force to the revolution in South Africa. It is, Trotsky says: "unthinkable without the awakening of the native masses? involving the growth of ?confidence in their strength, a heightened personal consciousness, a cultural growth.? Trotsky continues; "Under these conditions, the South African republic will emerge first of all as a ?black republic? . . . But it is entirely obvious that the predominant majority of the population, liberated from slavish dependence, will put a certain imprint on the state. Insofar as a victorious revolution will radically change the relation not only between the classes but also between the races and will assure to the blacks that place in the state that corresponds to their numbers, thus far will the social revolution in South Africa also have a national character."
We have not the slightest reason to close our eyes to this side of the question or to diminish its significance. On the contrary, the proletarian party should in words and deeds openly and boldly take the solution of the national (racial) question in its hands. Nevertheless, the proletarian party can and must solve the national problem by its own methods. The historical weapon of national liberation can be only the class struggle.

Trotsky goes on to criticise the alternative method developed by the Stalinised Comintern which turned national liberation into "an empty democratic abstraction that is elevated above the reality of class relations". In this schema different classes liberate themselves (temporarily) from material interests and become simple "anti-imperialist" forces. To encourage them to perform this act of class amnesia they are promised a "national-democratic" state.

Reference to Lenin's pre-1917 position is, says Trotsky, entirely fraudulent; Lenin always spoke about a revolutionary bourgeois democratic dictatorship and not about a spiritual "people's state". Moreover he drew no strategic class alliance perspective:

"he did not offer a bloc of all "anti-Tsarist forces" but carried out an independent class policy of the proletariat. An "anti-Tsarist" bloc was the idea of the Russian Social Revolutionaries and the Left Cadets, that is the parties of the petty and middle bourgeoisie".

Again Trotsky stresses: The Bolshevik Party defended the right of the oppressed nations to self determination with the methods of proletarian class struggle, entirely rejecting the charlatan "anti-imperialist"? blocs with the numerous petty-bourgeois "national" parties of Tsarist Russia (the Polish Socialist Party - PPS the party of Pilsudski in Tsarist Poland, Dashnak in Armenia, the Ukrainian nationalists, the Jewish Zionists, etc etc). The Bolsheviks have always mercilessly unmasked these parties, as well as the Russian Socialist Revolutionaries, their vacillations and adventurism, but especially their ideological lie of being above the class struggle. Lenin did not stop his intransigent criticism even when circumstances forced upon him this or that episodic, strictly practical, agreement with them.

There could be no question of any permanent alliance with them under the banner of "anti-Tsarism". Thus, Trotsky rejects the grossly opportunist use of the "anti-imperialist" united front? developed by the Stalinist Comintern into a strategic alliance committed (deceitfully) to the establishment of a bourgeois nationalist regime and later openly developed as the Popular Front. Trotsky agrees that it is completely wrong to "compete with the African Nationalist Congress in nationalist slogans" as the South African Trotskyists' theses put it, but makes clear that this must mean neither abstention from the democratic tasks nor capitulation to nationalism.

The Bolshevik-Leninists (Trotskyists) must "put themselves in defence of the Congress, as it is, in all cases where it is being attacked by the white oppressors". They must recognise and support the progressive tendencies in the program of the Congress. They must "unmask before the native masses the inability of the congress to achieve the realisation of even its own demands, because of its superficial, conciliatory policy. In contradistinction to the Congress, the Bolshevik-Leninists develop a programme of revolutionary class struggle."

Trotsky stresses that united action, temporary united fronts are possible. "Separate episodic agreements with the Congress, if they are forced by circumstances, are permissible only within the framework of strictly defined practical tasks, with the retention of full and complete independence of our own organisation and freedom of political criticism".

Trotsky sums up the perspective of permanent revolution for South Africa. It does not leap over the "national or the agrarian questions" but points out that these "can be solved only in a revolutionary way". That this "leads inevitably to the dictatorship of the proletariat, which guides the native peasant masses; and that the dictatorship of the proletariat will open an era of soviet regime and socialist reconstruction".

Lastly, Trotsky stresses that it would not be sufficient to repeat this "cornerstone of our programme" as an abstraction; the masses must be brought to this general "strategic" formula through the medium of a series of tactical slogans. It is possible to work out these slogans, at every given stage, only on the basis of an analysis of the concrete circumstances of the life and struggle of the proletariat and peasantry and the whole internal and international situations."
AZAPO & THE NATIONAL QUESTION

The main representative of the Black consciousness tradition, Azapo, oscillates between a two and a one nation theory. More specifically, its ?final goal? is ?One Azania, One Nation? yet its present definition of the national struggle to overthrow white rule centres on the black working class and its black middle class allies and excludes the whites on principle; ?For us the class alliances that need to be forged are those between the black working class and sections of the black middle class, those willing to act on the dictates of the working class . . ."

Azapo sincerely denies being anti-white but draws from this a false conclusion: ?Black people are incapable of racism. By racism we mean the discrimination against a group of people by another group with the aim of subjugation.? (Cape Action League News, June/July 1984) Class alliances can only be based on common class interests. To talk of an alliance with the middle class on the basis of the latter accepting ?dictates? and the goal of a ?socialist? Azania is typical petit-bourgeois populism. Whilst individuals from the middle classes, possibly in large numbers, can join the working class forces, accepting their socialist goal, they can do so only on the basis of forsaking and renouncing their own class standpoint. If they do this it is in no sense a class alliance. On the other hand, the working class can win allies, form blocs or united fronts with other classes for limited common goals. There will, however, always be a probability that the bourgeoisie will betray such temporary alliances out of fear of the proletariat, preferring subordination to its oppressor ?class brothers?.

This is one more way of saying that the ?national? bourgeoisie, despite its oppression, cannot consistently and firmly fight against external imperialism or? internal reaction. The petit-bourgeoisie is more radical but whether it will hold firmly to the struggle depends on the strength and the forward march of the proletariat. Otherwise its nature is to vacillate. If the proletariat, however, is misled into sharing not only a struggle but an ideology (nationalism) and an organisation (a people?s party or front) with the petit-bourgeoisie it is heading for disaster.

The black workers need first and foremost not two class or non-class parties, organisations or strategic united fronts but a revolutionary class party whose programme is internationalist. All nations and all nationalism can become oppressive and racist. Unfortunately, present oppression does not give immunity from the future possibility of becoming an oppressor. The tragic history of Zionism in this century proves this all too clearly. Black exclusionism is not racist, as the Stalinists falsely claim, but it is nationalist and, therefore, not socialist.

Azapo want to merge socialist and nationalist ideologies. In reality they abandon a purely democratic position without achieving a proletarian internationalist one; ?We reject the concept of race. There can be no two or three different races or nations in South Africa, We are striving for the emergence of a single undivided nation in South Africa and for a society which is non-exploitative."

This is an inconsistently democratic position. By espousing positively a ?one-nation? position its defenders deny self-determination to the various potential minorities within South Africa.

Of course now, under the apartheid state, the claims of the Bantustan leaders to be exercising national self-determination are completely bogus since these statelets are not the result of a free choice for separation by their peoples but were brutally imposed by the racist regime. Forcible population transfers gave them what spurious homogeneity they can claim.

Nevertheless, the Xhosa (18%), Sotho (13%), Zulu (20%), Vhacenda (2%), Twsana (9%), Swazi (2%) and Ndebele (2%) speaking communities or peoples certainly exist. Equally, the ?coloured? (9%) and the Asians (3%) constitute as yet distinct communities. These distinctions may have dissolved in the trade union or anti-apartheid struggle for the vanguard elements and for large sections of the working class. It is indeed vital for the struggle against apartheid that there is the maximum unity. Therefore, the oppressed peoples should combine wherever they are willing to do so in non-racial, non-?national? organisations.

The class best able to accomplish this is the working class whose organisations can, do and should be formed on this
basis. To fight the bosses and the state this unity is essential. But, in the homelands and outside them, there remain ?backward? sections of the masses. To maintain and strengthen unity and to bring the ?backward? sections in behind the vanguard it is vital to undercut any suggestion that any of these ?peoples? or communities will on the achievement of majority rule be coerced into a unitary state or that in a Black republic they may expect to find themselves an oppressed minority. Apart from anything else, this is important in order to undermine the demagogy of wretches such as Buthelezi.

Given the fate of the Ugandan Asians or the ?tribal minorities? in Zimbabwe, It would be foolish to suggest that a Black republic would be incapable of national oppression. All bourgeois states and even deformed workers? states ruled by a bureaucratic caste can and do oppress national minorities. The need to fight to abolish the Bantustans of today does not release black South African - Azanian democrats and revolutionary socialists from maintaining within their programme the right of oppressed nations to self determination. Moreover, these peoples must themselves decide if they are a nation and if they wish autonomy or separation, freely and by democratic means.

The reality of South Africa today is that there are divisions in the oppressed majority. These divisions have been fostered by Botha and aided by the ?homeland? leaders. The spring 1986 clashes over land between Ndebeles and Sothos indicate this. The existence and serious threat that Inkatha poses, with its murderous attacks on militants and its attempts to split the trade unions, must be politically combated and undermined in Natal. And here the assertion of the unity of the Azanian people is insufficient to win over the masses who are not directly involved in militant union struggles or school and community boycotts.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

The principal writer on the national question opposed to the ANC/SACP tradition is Neville Alexander (No Sizwe) author of One Azanla, One Nation - The National Question in South Africa (1979) and An Approach to the National Question in South Africa (Azanla Worker vol 2, No 2, Dec 1985)

Alexander mounts a powerful critique of the racist regime?s nationalities policy and of the multi-national positions of the SAPC and the ANC. He sets out to combat both the Balkanisation policies of the apartheid regime and its ?homeland? stooges and the Stalinist stages theory that dictates a bourgeois democratic solution to the anti-apartheid struggle. He does this because he believes that ?a pluralist position on the national question carries the inevitable implication of a two stage revolution? (No Sizwe pl06)

Alexander wishes to give the proletariat the leading role in the national struggle, to proclaim its unbreakable linkage to the struggle against capitalism and to give it a socialist goal. This leads him to advocate one form, and one form only, of resolution to the anti apartheid struggle - a unitary South African/Azanlan nation state. Not only is the ?reactionary ?nationalism? of the ?homeland? leaders? bogus, but consequently ?the ?nations? they claim to represent, be they ?Tswana?, ?Coloured?, ?Indian?, or anything else are non-existent entities which no recourse to theory can create.? (No Sizwe p 180)

He is willing to grant only that the ?so called ?ethnic groups? are specifically either language groups, colour-castes, religious groups or administrative groups and no more.? (ibid) However he makes a serious hole in his own case when he concedes that they could attain national identity but only as a result of counter-revolution and defeat (e.g. the formation of Israel out of Palestine or Pakistan out of India). As we have seen in the struggle to prevent such divisions, the refusal of recognition of the nationhood, ethnic group status, etc. of these groupings will be of no help whatsoever.

The other problem with Neville Alexander?s nationality theory is that it leads to a merging of nation and class and a simple identification of the anti-apartheid struggle itself with the struggle against capitalism. In his position, the racial oppression of the black people is understood as a function of the capitalist system itself . . . What is necessary is the liquidation of those institutions and practices which have given rise to national oppression, to the exclusion of the majority of the people from the body politic and from the enjoyment of equal rights in all spheres. This means nothing else than the abolition of capitalism itself". (No Slzwe p 178)
Alexander argues that because of apartheid the struggle assumes a national form. But its content is necessarily a social one. It cannot be halted at the mere integration of the black people into the existing economic relationships on a basis of equality. The national question is thus released from its basis in bourgeois society and becomes the basis of a struggle against bourgeois society. The nation for Alexander is to be formed without the bourgeoisie and indeed against the bourgeoisie; 'The nation - consists of all the people who are prepared to throw off the yoke of capitalist exploitation and racist oppression.' Therefore Alexander concludes that 'The working class, in short, has become the leading class in the nation and is about to constitute itself as the nation of South Africa.'

By 1985, Alexander was posing this proletarian nation approach even more vigorously; 'The positive historical task of the black workers in solving the national question in South Africa is the construction of the (socialist) nation of Azania.' (An Approach to the National Question).

By giving the proletariat a positive approach to the nation, Alexander espouses a form of nationalism - albeit one that he insists has a proletarian class content. He has already rejected Lenin and Stalin's views on the national question as Euro-centred. He claims that in Europe it was natural to think that the national question was a bourgeois one. In the imperialised world it is different. Again, Alexander confuses national struggles with nationalism and (falsely) ascribes to Lenin the view that he assigned to the bourgeoisie the role of the leading class in this bourgeois-democratic question. Lenin no more did this than he assigned this role to the bourgeoisie in the agrarian question or the question of the democratic republic, he fought for the proletariat to take the lead in the resolution of all these questions (questions which together comprise the bourgeois revolution?).

Nor did Trotsky disagree with this approach. He simply insisted that they could only in fact be resolved by the proletariat establishing an alliance with the peasantry and passing uninterruptedly from bourgeois-democratic to proletarian social tasks. This did not lead in any way to Trotsky confusing the class nature of these tasks.

If one insists, as Alexander does, in confusing these tasks via an eclectic 'form and content' analogy which the Stalinist charlatans resort to in order to yoke together vulgar contradictions - then you turn the national struggle into a utopian ideology and rob the proletariat of its internationalism.

'It can be stated clearly, therefore, that in historical practice in the 20th century, working class movements and their organisations in different countries have in fact led struggles for national liberation and national re-unification, and ipso facto, taken the lead in building or consolidating the particular nations in the national states. Of course this does not imply that Marxists or socialists are or should be nationalists in any chauvinistic or exclusivist sense. The point is simply that the working class starts from a national perspective rather than an internationalist one. (An Approach to the National Question . . .)

This positive espousal of nationalism leads to a subjective idealist approach to the national question. Alexander adopts this from the writings of various 'Academic Marxists' originating from the post-Althusserian school, especially Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities (1985) which defines the nation as 'an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'.

Alexander himself remarks that this 'smacks of idealism' but merely offers a corrective to it by adding that this imagined community must be 'a social reality to which individuals inside and outside the nation have to respond' and that it must be 'embedded in very concrete capitalist or socialist relations on concrete national territory'. Alexander thus merely insists that it be a collective i.e. a class 'imaging' and this must rest itself in either capitalist or post-capitalist social relations.

This, however, does not escape from idealism and it creates as its subjective standpoint 'the class' whether bourgeois or proletarian. Naturally, this ideal nationality that the proletariat has positively to establish has to have its consciousness prepared for it by specialists in the production of ideas - intellectuals. Alexander praises Anderson's work because it 'enables us to concentrate on the nation as an ideological construct'? (ibid p 5) From this it is clear that 'The positive historical task of the black workers in solving the national question in South Africa is the construction of
the (socialist) nation of Azania? (ibid) and that: "It is the nature of the process of liberation that the political and ideological construction of the new nation precedes its socio-economic realisation."

Alexander believes that in the task of ideological construction? it is the role of ?organic intellectuals? such as himself to assist the working class: "to fashion an oppositional or, more accurately a counter-hegemonic ideology. This they do by, amongst other things, careful attention to the language which is inserted into and generalised in the political programmes and actions of the organisations of their class. The importance of this scholarly activity derives from the fact that it is in and through language that the individual is constituted as a subject". (ibid)

From this approach, adopted from ?semiology?, flows the obsession with language and terminology, with denying the terms, nation, national group, ethnic group to the various groupings of South African society as well as his insistence on the one-ness of the Azanian nation. It leads also to an essentially propagandist role for the ?organic intellectuals?.

Indeed the role that Neville Alexander and the Cape Action League seem to have set themselves is to ?permeate? Azapo with a ?correct? view of the national question, namely, that ?the struggle for national liberation is, from the point of view of the exploited classes, the inescapable political form of the class struggle".

This view can indeed be accepted - in words - by the Black Consciousness Movement without it altering their petit-bourgeois populist practice one iota. Indeed, Alexander is in effect manufacturing an ideology, in the negative sense of the term, one that can be used to demagogically deceive the proletariat in the way that Mugabe, Machel and others have done before.

The duty of the proletarian vanguard in South Africa is to defend a consistently revolutionary democratic position on the national question which opposes all existing national oppression and which will give no ground for any future oppression. This means adopting an Internationalist not a nationalist viewpoint.

Trotsky once observed with regard to Marx?s famous slogan, "The workingmen have no fatherland? that it has ?more than once been evaluated by philistines as an agitational quip". The slogan has not been outdated either by the incorporation of the working class within the democratic system, as the social-democrats of Europe claim, or by the contradiction between imperialism and the oppressed nations, as the ?Third world? petit-bourgeois nationalists assert.

All positive espousal of ?national interests? involves the fracturing of the working class? unity both ?at home? and ?abroad?. Whilst the working class is not at all indifferent to national oppression, it fights it from the vantage point of consistent democracy, that is to say, no privileges for any nation. It fights it with the purpose of overthrowing ?its own? ruling class and helping its class brothers and sisters to do likewise. In short, revolutionaries must take their part in the national struggle, their banner held aloft, and on it must be inscribed the words of the Communist Manifesto:

Workers of all countries, unite!

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