

On the National Question

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Introduction

The importance of theoretical struggle on national question springs essentially from the need to take a correct political attitude based on Marxist foundations in the face of the liberation struggle of oppressed nations. Marxism is not an impressionist or positivist philosophy limiting itself only with interpreting the world, but an integral world view which strives to change the world and develops in an inextricably dialectical relationship with revolutionary practice.

At the time of Marx and Engels, when ideological foundations of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat were being established, the historical framework of national question was dealt with in the context of bourgeois democratic revolutions and formation of nation-states. Marx and Engels focused their attention on the downfall of old feudal political structures and the formation of nation-states which clear the way for the development of modern capitalist society. In the transition period from feudalism to capitalism “national republic” as the embodiment of demands for bourgeois democratic transformations and “civil rights and bourgeois nationalism” as a current of thought, both had a progressive content. The fact that founders of Marxism credited bourgeois democratic struggles and establishment of nation-states in Europe from the standpoint of general historical perspective was a reflection of their revolutionary attitude.

While Polish nationalism struggling against Tsarist Russia which is the closest ally of reactionary powers at that time in Europe was supported by Marx and Engels, those like southern Slavs that were serving reactionary forces were bitterly criticised by them. In a historical period when West Europe was an arena of bourgeois democratic struggles, Marx and Engels, considered national question in this same context with the perspective that these struggles would bring the proletariat’s turn.

While capital creates a historical tendency toward economic integration on a world scale, the bourgeois ideology is politically “nationalist” since the bourgeois world is divided into different nation-states. While regarding bourgeois nationalism historically as a step forward compared with feudal society, Marxism also reveals how it would acquire a reactionary content once the capitalist world-system is formed. As the revolutionary world view of the proletariat, the final goal of Marxism is to smash all nation-states, end national privileges and form a world community of humanity on a voluntary basis; that is true internationalism.

For this reason, it is incompatible with the essence of Marxism to identify national liberation movements that aim to establish a nation-state with the proletarian struggle that aims to end the nation-state phenomenon. Although a national liberation movement has a limited revolutionary character, it is clear that proletariat cannot shape its revolutionary policy on the basis of national liberation movement and limit itself with this.

Thus national question can have only a secondary and limited place in the whole body of Marxism and there’s nothing strange about it. However, Marxism could not stay and has not stood indifferent, as long as a national question stands out as a political problem which must be resolved in relation to the interests of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat. Therefore Marx and Engels’ attitude when they supported national liberation movement in Ireland and Poland is still a guiding attitude of historical importance.

On the national question, as on other political questions, we can assume a correct political attitude only on the basis of internationalist communist principles provided by Marxism and which we must always uphold. Thus in this work we will put forward our main principles on national question.

The Nation-State

1- Those who have an academic way of approach claim that there's no methodological approach in Marx and Engels on the national question, that they even have not made a comprehensive definition of nation. However, Marxism is not a collection of "doctrines" made of academic studies and frozen definitions in the face of various problems. Since its first days Marxism has taken shape as a philosophy of action, aiming at changing the world through conscious revolutionary action of the proletariat and it has had a constantly developing character.

It is not the method of Marxism to examine and define a historical-social phenomenon as something frozen by isolating it from the complex elements that shape or characterize it and from the variability of factors it is related. Even a definition which seems most near to truth is faced with the risk that it may not embrace all aspects of that phenomenon's movement and different properties it can assume at different historical moments. Marxism is neither a pile of dead ideas nor a collection of ready-made recipes. Marxism is a lively and dynamic worldview which aims at finding solutions in accordance with the needs of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat to the problems arising at different historical moments.

2- As capitalist production relations developed and expanded within the hearth of the feudal society, the desire of the emerging bourgeoisie to dominate its market and commercial relations began to intensify. In the course of the bourgeoisie's fight against feudal reaction to establish a modern central unity under its political power, the ideological foundations of nation and nation-state were created. Thus the main themes of bourgeois-democratic revolutions were embodied as the formation of a new society on the basis of a united market (a nation-community instead of old feudal provincialism and a society of kingdom subjects) and this appeared as the political target.

In the course of transition from feudalism to capitalism, the pace, sweep and form (from above or from below) of bourgeois-national democratic transformations involved great variety depending on whether the capitalist development was early (England, the Netherlands, France) or delayed (Germany). In the final analysis, nationalism appeared on the stage of history as the bourgeois ideology which is formed during the bourgeoisie's struggle to establish its domination on the market and form its political unity.

3- Bourgeois nationalism was the main impetus of the revolutionary surges which broke out in Europe in 18th and 19th century; and bourgeois nationalist movements were everywhere in Europe. On the other hand, the 1848 revolutions breaking out in Europe were a turning point which began exhibiting the essential character of class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat which began entering the stage of history with its own political demands.

The political significance of this turning point began to find its reflection in the analyses of the founders of Marxism following the 1848 revolutions. There were two main axes dominating the assessments of Marx and Engels at the time when the Communist Manifesto (1847) was written. The first was the estimation of the development tendencies of modern capitalism taking England -the country in which it was most developed- as base and from there to produce a historical perspective for the proletariat. The second was determining the role of the proletariat it can play (to be extreme opposition party) in a bourgeois democratic revolution and its demands on this basis, in light of the Germany example where feudal reaction was not overcome.

But later on the experiences of the 1848 revolutions, Marx and Engels both in "Address to the League" (1850) and in 18th Brumaire (1852) put forward that the war slogan of the proletariat had to be "permanent revolution". Thus, a perspective was developed, which asserted that the proletariat must not limit itself with the role of an extreme opposition party even in countries such as Germany and should enter political struggle with its own demands and for its own power.

Marx and Engels were exhibiting the contradiction between the progressive aspect of the bourgeoisie in relation to the past (feudal reaction) and the reactionary aspect it shows in relation to the future (the proletariat entering the stage of history) in a historical moment when bourgeois democratic struggles were still being carried out. This contradiction would put its stamp on the bourgeois democratic struggles carried out in the 19th century.

Under these circumstances, the perspective of "permanent revolution" put for-

ward by Marx and Engels to define the character of the proletarian struggle found its significance as an expression of a historical perspective. 1871 Paris Commune was, a preliminary experience proving that the historical perspective of the proletariat could be realized, the war cry of communards who set out to conquer the sky reaching into the 20th century.

4- The approach of Marx and Engels towards the two national questions which were on the agenda in those days (Poland and Ireland) formed the essential lines of the revolutionary program of the proletariat on this question.

Supporting the nationalist independence movement of Poland against the Holy Alliance (Prussia, Austria and Tsarist Russia) which was the bastion of reaction at that time was in accordance with the class interests of the proletariat in regards with the elimination of the obstacles before its own development. For this reason, Marx and Engels regarded the national independence movement of Poland as one deserving support.

As with the Irish question, at first, they saw it as one which could be solved during the progress of the social revolution in Britain. That is, a national question that can be solved by the proletarian revolution in passing. But in a situation where the social revolution was at rest and the British imperialism managed to spread chauvinism to the working class, the national independence struggle in Ireland came to the fore and gained importance. Marx and Engels thought that under these concrete conditions, a success of the national liberation struggle would be an important political blow to British imperialism and that this could wake up the proletariat in Britain and trigger the social revolution. Therefore, although they were against federation in principle, they defended that, once the right to separate was acknowledged, it could be accepted as a means for a possible way of transition to voluntary unity. Most important conclusion the founders of Marxism drew from the Irish experience about national question was: “A nation which oppresses other nations cannot be free.”¹

5- As a consequence of mainly the unequal development of capitalism, national awakenings have not taken place simultaneously all over the world. While the struggle for national unions which accompanies the period of bourgeois democratic revolutions mainly between 1789-1871, this awakening came about in the beginning of the 20th century in East Europe, Balkans and Asia. And the second half of the 20th century has seen the national liberation struggles in Africa. Af-

1 For a comprehensive summary of the thoughts of Marx and Engels on these issues see Lenin's *The Right of Nations to Self-determination* dated February-March 1914.

ter colonies obtained their independence, the national liberation struggles took their place in history as a thing of the past with the exception of just a few belated cases (Ireland, Basque, Palestine, Kurdistan etc.).

6- Before the nation-state, which corresponds to modern capitalism, in every form of the feudal state (either a small kingdom or a great empire), the people or peoples under its sovereignty used to constitute a state community but not a national unity. So “nation” is not as old as state and its emergence on the scene of history does not correspond to state in general, but to a certain (capitalist) state in a certain historical moment. Thus, it is not in conformity with historical reality to consider the pre-capitalist past of peoples which differ in geography, culture and history under the title “national-cultural identity”. Although it is true that the past of communities which acquire a “national identity” in the process of the formation of modern bourgeois state would have its impact on this identity to a certain extent, freezing the historical-cultural differences of communities by categorizing them as “characteristics of nations” is an idealistic approach.

So, trying to explain the phenomenon of nation mainly by “historical-cultural-psychological” arguments is not a correct approach. Such an approach found its essential expression in the analyses of Austrian Marxist Otto Bauer and influenced many other Marxists.² The thesis Bauer defended as a solution to national question was based on raising national cultural autonomy against the right of nations to self-determination. This approach was the natural outcome of Bauer’s reformist and social-chauvinist understanding.

7- On the basis of the fact that rigid-definitionist approaches would be insufficient in grasping formations in motion, Lenin too approached the problem from the standpoint of the historical formation of nation-state

8- Historically, nation is a socio-economic phenomenon which formed at a certain stage (transition to capitalism) of the evolution of society. The nation phenomenon which depends on the existence conditions particular to the bourgeois society, such as a united market and economic competition with other societies on the basis of this market, is doomed to be transient in the flow of history. And so called “national consciousness” which is the reflection of this phenomenon will not be everlasting on the basis of ‘cultural unity’ or “lingual unity” of vari-

2 The definition given by Stalin in his article *Marxism and the National Question* written in 1913 in Vienna reveals his eclectic approach being shaped partly by Otto Bauer: “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.” (<http://marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1913/03.htm>)

ous communities; it has a content and lifespan limited with bourgeois ideology which supports bourgeois society.

Marxism is in favour of fusion of nations and elimination of national divides. Capitalist development and worldwide expansive nature of capital create a historical tendency towards overcoming the obstacles of nation and state. But the realization of this potential is possible only with overthrowing the capitalist system, which is divided into different nation states on the basis of economic competition, by the advance of world proletarian revolution. Under capitalism the nation state is a reality.

9- Although various economic-political-military unions may well be formed between bourgeois nation states as a result of the worldwide expansion of capitalism, these unions can only be “unions” in competition. And while imperialist struggle for getting a bigger share from the global market disintegrates existing “unions” and leads to new ones, the inner tendency for conflict and competition continues to dominate. While capital tends to internationalize, the bourgeois ideology reflects the interests of a certain nation-state because of the division into nation states and economic competition. The bourgeois ideology, as the means of bourgeois hegemony on the proletariat, must keep its nationalist essence in order to conceal class struggle and maintain bourgeois domination with the propaganda of “national unity”

Marxism, on the other hand, which aims at forming the international unity of the proletariat, is internationalist in essence. Even in the case that proletarian revolution breaks out in a single state, the target of the proletariat is not to form and strengthen a new kind of “nation-state”, but carrying on the struggle in order to spread the revolution to the whole world. This is one and the most important of the points which must be understood from the permanency of the revolution. Otherwise, proletarian revolutions will inevitably be isolated and destroyed leading to formation of new “nation states” in the form of bureaucratic dictatorships.

10- The proletariat, whose state of wage-slavery is international, whose class enemy is international, whose liberation conditions are international, has no country. It will reach genuine freedom by gaining internationalist communist class consciousness and forming its international unity of struggle. Marxism, revealing that national borders are reactionary, that emancipation of humanity is possible only by abolishing nation-states by proletarian revolutions, aims at reaching the synthesis of world citizenship via voluntary fusion of nations.

What Is the Right of Nations to Self-determination, Why and How Do We Defend This Right?

1- The right of nations to self-determination is in essence the right to establish a separate state

The right of nations to self-determination means the right for a nation to determine its political fate by its own will. To acknowledge this right must involve accepting the right for different nations to separate from a political unit they are forced to stay in and form their own independent nation-state

Since the nation-state is a product of capitalist era, national self-determination is historically a bourgeois-democratic political right in essence. Revolutionary program of the proletariat cannot content itself with declaring that national self-determination is acknowledged. Because the bourgeoisie, too, can talk about national self-determination, provided that its political content is greatly emptied. For this reason, in addition to this acknowledgement, struggle must be waged on the following points:

- * Definite rejection of using any kind of force against the oppressed nation fighting for its right to separate politically.
- * Defending that it is only up to the oppressed nation to decide whether to separate or not.
- * Waging ideological struggle against all political views that reject the right of nations to self-determination, advocate repression on the oppressed nations and national communities.

* Absolute rejection of national privileges and an official state language.

2- The right of nations to self-determination is still relevant

Capitalism depends on unequal economic development and there is also an unequal political development with respect to the formation of nation states. For example, while formation of nation-states was a problem of 18th and 19th centuries for West Europe it appeared on the agenda with a delay in 20th century in East Europe, Asia and Africa. Due to differences in concrete conditions a problem that has been concluded in Europe could come out late in other regions.

We can say that at present the number of nations waging a struggle for their political independency is quite a few, if we set aside provoked national conflicts resulting from imperialist rivalry and division. Despite this, the national question is still significant and requires a correct political approach.

3- Distinction between the oppressed and oppressor nation is the first condition of a correct attitude on the national self-determination

It is impossible to adopt a correct political attitude without making a distinction between the oppressed and oppressor nations. Communists can provide no support for any chauvinism that can appear in imperialist countries, which come out mainly due to rivalry among them, nor any bourgeois or petty-bourgeois nationalism of an oppressor nation even if it is not an imperialist country. Thus, to avoid any misunderstandings, it must be clearly expressed that, what is meant by the national question is the question of political independence of a nation which is under political oppression.

National self-determination principle in the revolutionary program of the proletariat involves opposing imperialist invasions and annexations besides acknowledging the right of separation of an oppressed nation from oppressor. On the other hand one must point out the difference between the position of colonies and oppressed nations whose territory is under invasion, which have not achieved their political independence (i.e. have not yet found their own nation-states) and the position of less or medium developed capitalist countries that have gained their independence and formed their nation-states. For the former we have a historically belated national question to be resolved.

The fact that economic dependency produces political or military intervention in medium or less developed countries that find their places in the lower steps

of the hierarchy of the imperialist-capitalist system, is a common feature of the world capitalist system. This kind of “political dependency” is permanently reproduced unless the underlying economic dependency is put an end to, that is, unless struggle is directed at the imperialist-capitalist system as such and the country at hand manages to get out of the system.

Therefore the position of the medium or less developed countries, which have their own nation-states but occupy a lower position in the general functioning of the world system and thus are economically dependent, is different from the status of colonial or semi-colonial countries of the early 20th century. In the case of colonial or semi-colonial countries there is an outright trampling of a political right in the form of denying a nation its “independent and sovereign” nation-state (that is, a separate state).

In reality there is no problem of gaining political independency in medium or less developed countries having their own nation-states, as long as the “independent and sovereign state” situation continues, that is bourgeois powers continue to reign, which does not mean to disregard the fact that all kinds of inequality and dependency relations are produced and reproduced within the functioning of the imperialist system. This independence is already achieved within the framework of the laws of motion of the system. Beyond this, the problem of “independence” is a different matter that can only be conceived within the scope of an anti-imperialist (i.e. anti-capitalist) economic liberation struggle led by the proletariat and which gives the word its essential content.

The pseudo anti-imperialist attitudes of bourgeois powers in this kind of countries, which do not aim at the system but result from conflicts of interest with the imperialist countries, cannot be taken in the same scope with anti-imperialist struggle or national liberation struggle which we find historically legitimate.

On the other hand, the proletariat’s position must also be clear on the kind of “national question” which arises when a bourgeois state invades and annexes another bourgeois state’s territory. In such cases of invasion and annexation the right of the nation subject to an unjust attack to resist must be acknowledged as legitimate. But here proletariat’s support is undoubtedly not to the bourgeoisie but to the working masses of the attacked country. That is the support has nothing to do with defending or protecting the rights of sovereignty of the bourgeois nation-state.

4- Defending the right of nations to self-determination is vital for the international unity and hegemony of the proletariat

Economic inequalities between different nations, the “poor-rich” divide etc. do not disappear by simply acknowledging the right of nations to self-determination or achieving political independence. Resolving the national question clears the picture that the chief problem is capitalism and that all kinds of economical inequality would be produced and reproduced unless the imperialist-capitalist world system is overthrown.

For this reason, such an “anti-imperialist struggle” outside the scope of revolutions aiming at overthrowing the world capitalist system is in essence an expression of a bourgeois or petty-bourgeois national developmentalist political course and, sooner or later, destined to stay within the capitalist system. That’s why, national liberation struggles which are limited only to achieving political independence are not within the scope of anti-imperialist revolution.

However, despite their limited content the national liberation struggles are for the good of the proletariat for two reasons: first, they help overcome the problem of “national struggle” which shadows the fact that the point is to go for the unity of struggle of the proletariat to overthrow the capitalist system; second, they create the possibility to orient the masses revolting for national independence against colonialism towards a genuine struggle for liberation and freedom under the hegemony of the proletariat, that is towards the social revolution. The question of political independence is historically mixed with the question of getting out of the feudal sluggishness of broad peasant masses. One of the prominent features of national liberation struggles is mass revolts of peasants demanding a land revolution.

The national liberation struggle and proletarian revolution are two different things. It is perfectly possible that the proletarian revolution will solve the national question in passing, but to assume that the national liberation struggle can bear the tasks of the proletarian revolution is a caricature of Marxism.

It is quite in accordance with Marxism that the revolutionary party of the proletariat puts forward democratic demands for the unsolved tasks (such as national question, land revolution) and include such demands into its program these demands that concern wide peasant masses. But it depends on whether the proletariat can establish its hegemony in the revolution to fulfil these demands in their full extent.

5- It is the class contradiction and not national contradiction that is essential for the proletariat

In the imperialism era the real political polarization on a world scale takes place on the axis of classes and not of nations. Even in the conflicts between oppressor and oppressed nations it is the class polarization that decides in the last analysis. That is why we frequently see in history that the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nations, which is unable to form a unity of fight with the proletariat of the oppressor nation, surrenders to the oppressor nation's bourgeoisie when it is afraid of the revolt of its own proletariat and poor peasantry.

One political result of turning a blind eye to the fact that national contradiction is taken higher than class contradiction has been polishing petty-bourgeois nationalist revolutionary currents and expecting from the struggles they lead results that go beyond their limits. The experience of many national liberation struggles have proven that this conduct could be very harmful to the revolutionary fight of the proletariat, that it would result in proletariat tail-ending petty-bourgeois revolutionism, and that in such a case one can not talk about an independent political line of the proletariat, that it would then be a day dream to establish proletariat's hegemony over the toiling masses that fight and that the struggle would at most end up with the victory of the petty-bourgeois revolutionary leaderships.

These experiences have demonstrated that concessions given from the revolutionary political line of the proletariat (permanent revolution on a world scale) to the advantage of petty-bourgeois national revolutionism have caused harm to the struggle of the proletariat. In order for national liberation struggles to proceed into a real proletarian revolution which aims to overthrow capitalism, the revolutionary proletariat must enter the struggle and gain the leadership with its own programmatic goals and war methods among the revolting masses. That is, the proletariat must establish its hegemony over the toiling masses. Under the hegemony of petty-bourgeois revolutionary leaderships, the result, in the best case, would be (whatever they call themselves, "socialist", "anti-imperialist" etc.) nothing but founding of national developmentalist nation-states.

All kinds of conceptions leading to the conclusion that national contradiction is more significant than class contradiction; theses alleging that the fundamental contradiction is the north-south contradiction; the argument that the proletariat in advanced capitalist countries has lost its revolutionary mission; pseudo anti-imperialist rhetoric of Third Worldism etc., all are, according to us, in contradiction with the essence of Marxism and its basic conception of the historical role

of proletarian revolutions.

So the real content of the national liberation struggle must be clearly expressed. Unless a national liberation struggle waged against an imperialist state or an oppressor nation is developed into a proletarian revolution under the hegemony of the proletariat, it is purely a struggle within bourgeois democratic scope limited with the goal of founding a separate nation-state.

6- Revolutionary proletariat fights the tendency of the oppressed nation's bourgeoisie to obtain privileges

Since the right of nations to self-determination is essentially a bourgeois democratic right, the dividing line between political attitudes of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat must be clearly drawn. For the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation, the right of nations to self-determination means to end the struggle on the basis of its own class interests. It has been frequently seen in history that, even the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation, having won the victory in the struggle against oppressor nations, immediately starts to deprive other national communities of their national rights. One example of this is the conduct of the Turkish bourgeoisie. It achieved its independence waging a national struggle against the invasion of imperialist states in the I. World War and then moved on to oppress the Kurdish nation.

For this reason, the revolutionary proletariat defends the national self-determination demand together with the demand of preventing new privileges gained on the backs of other nations. This attitude means to defend national self-determination while drawing clear lines with the chauvinism of the oppressed nation's bourgeoisie.

7- We must be alert against illusions stemming from petty-bourgeois radicalism

The proletariat's class interests call for transcending national boundaries and national narrow-mindedness. The proletariat can not make the national question absolute and turn it into a fetish. Nationalism, even in the best case which arises on the ground of a revolt of the oppressed nation against oppressor nation, is essentially a bourgeois ideology. Existence of the political currents which are shaped by petty-bourgeois revolutionism inspired partly by Stalinism and the conception of "national socialism" it created, does not change this fact. What this can imply at best is the fact that the petty-bourgeois radicalism takes on the task

(achieving national unity, establishing national state) which historically belongs to the bourgeoisie.

8- Revolutionary proletariat does not support every national movement

Revolutionary proletariat is not obliged to support every national movement. It is incompatible with the interests of the proletariat to support reactionary national movements not motivated by an historically progressive demand. There are even such movements that have turned into a toy of imperialist powers, which put them outside the scope of a national liberation struggle.

It is perfectly possible that a national movement that has not been supported because it has served reaction at one moment of history, reappears on the scene of history as qualified to be supported by the proletariat, or vice versa.³ On this basis, the variable character of the communists' political attitude in the face of changing concrete conditions, is not an indicator of inconsistency of Marxism, but on the contrary of its consistency. But the approach of communists must carefully be based on concrete analysis of the concrete situation of national movements, making sure that it is free from national prejudices, oppressor nation chauvinism, theoretical dogmatism, narrow group interests. Communists must have the flexibility to revise their approach depending on the changes in the national movement or the environment in which it takes place.

Revolutionary proletariat has a positive view of the fusion between nations, which is not realized through force, but produced by concrete conditions of a certain historical era. However, it is possible that separatist bourgeois movements could occur later on within the same historical formation due to inner conflicts of interest within the bourgeoisie (for instance bourgeois separatist movements seen in European countries like Italy, Belgium etc. which have formed their national unity long ago). But the proletariat has no interest in decomposing an historically accomplished union of nations into its precedent components.

Support of revolutionary proletariat for a national question can never go to the point of strengthening this or that nationalism. But petty-bourgeois nationalist leaderships who bear the mission of the bourgeoisie (despite they assume socialist colours) take the exact opposite attitude.

³ For instance, while Southern Slavs were not supported because they were set to serve reactionary tsarist regime and thus strengthen European reaction, Eastern Europe and the Balkans at a later stage witnessed a mass awakening against feudal reaction, which must be supported.

For the proletariat, whose class interests necessitates the unity of all countries' workers and whose historical mission is to end national divides by securing the voluntary unity and fusion of all nations, the support for national question means fulfilling a "negative" task. Its "positive" task is not deepening and spreading national divides, but overthrowing nation-states and paving the way to voluntary union of nations by a world revolution which progress embracing national units as big as possible.

9- The criterion is not national interests, but class interests of the proletariat in defending the right of separation

It is programmatically a fundamental principle of communists on the "national question" to acknowledge national self-determination including the right to separate. But the criterion which decides the proletariat's attitude on the national question cannot be "national interests" etc. The criterion is class interests of the proletariat. For this reason, acknowledging the separation right at large can not mean that separation would be advised and propagated in every concrete situation. Communists would assess each problem individually and take their independent attitude according to the proletariat's interests. However, that separation could not be advised in a certain case, can not be extended to the point of denial of the right to separate.

Main task of the oppressed nation's communists is to prevent mixing of banners (revolutionary banner of the proletariat and bourgeois and petty-bourgeois nationalist banners). For this reason, an oppressed nation's communist supports the demand for political independence not from the standpoint of the interests of a new nation-state but because it constitutes a forward step that helps clear the way for the proletarian revolution. Besides, it wages a fight against small nation philistinism, its tendency towards isolationism and give the struggle for unity of the proletariat highest priority.

10- Acknowledgement of national self-determination is necessary to overcome national prejudices

Rejecting the right of nations to self-determination in the name of "emphasising the class", or by saying that "the point is the self-determination of the proletariat" will result in overlooking the continuation of oppressor nation privileges. If the right to separation is not acknowledged, then the nationalist propaganda of the oppressed nation's bourgeoisie would be effectual and could lead the masses. When the revolutionary proletariat, while acknowledging the right of nations to

self-determination, manages to gain in practice the leadership of such a struggle that is wide enough to implement all revolutionary transformations that are mainly for the interests of the labouring masses (for example land revolution for peasants) then it can expose the limits of bourgeois nationalism. Thus it can pave the way for voluntary unity of toiling masses from different nations. Thus it can render ineffective the bourgeois nationalism.

If the proletariat, after seizing power in a certain geography, acknowledges the right of nations to self-determination and, further, exercises positive discrimination in favour of the oppressed nation, then this is not in contradiction with the aim of spreading the proletarian revolution worldwide and abolishment of national borders. Because the program of the revolutionary proletariat envisages that the way to the fusion of nations passes from voluntary unity. And a voluntary unity can be formed only on the basis of defending separation right.

11- It is the oppressed nation's business to decide how to use the right to separation

Another principle of the revolutionary proletariat on the national question is to make sure that the proletariat of the oppressor nation stays impartial to the oppressed nation's choice between separation or a new union.

The working class of the oppressor nation must be able to keep impartial to the oppressed nation's choice either it is to build a separate state or form a unity within the borders of another nation-state by its own will. Because wherever the oppressed nation decides to stay, the proletariat always aims at organising in such a manner that it can form the unity of fight of all workers across these boundaries. It is clear that workers who defend that the oppressed nation must in any case stay within the borders of their "own" (oppressor) nation-state, are contaminated with oppressor nation chauvinism.

The main point for the communists of both oppressed and oppressor nation is to produce all decisions according to the goal of advancing of the proletarian struggle. Thus, in the event that a revolution embracing oppressor and oppressed nations' proletarians develops, the task of the communists of the oppressed nation is to struggle for and propagate that a united workers' power is in the interest of poor masses.

12- Revolutionary proletariat is for big and democratically united states

In principle Marxism is against small states; it defends centralisation. But it defends a democratic centralisation against bureaucratic centralisation. For this reason the revolutionary proletariat's programme on national question does not oppose autonomy of lands having different characteristics of economy, ways of life, national composition etc.

Because Marxism is against building national unity by exerting force over different nations, it takes a lenient attitude to the demand for federation should it constitute a step towards a centralized unity.

13- Policies of oppressor and oppressed nation communists are same in their essence despite they may differ on the level of tactics

The main point from the standpoint of historical interests of the proletariat is to build the common revolutionary power of both oppressed and oppressor nation proletarians and thus create, on the basis of acknowledging right to separation, a voluntary will for unity among the toiling masses of the oppressed nation.

But depending on the differences of concrete conditions, internationalist policy of the proletariat, while being the same in its essence, may differ in propaganda and tactics. Common target can be reached only when communists of the oppressor nation acknowledge the right to separate and the oppressed nation's communists give weight to unity in their propaganda. It is necessary for two reasons to acknowledge the right to separation even when unity is advisable (in the event of a proletarian revolution embracing both oppressed and oppressor nations like in the 1917 October Revolution). First, developing and consolidating the political consciousness of the oppressor nation's proletariat against dominant nation chauvinism, second, for oppressor nation communists to prove in practice to the oppressed nation that they are not contaminated with dominant nation chauvinism.

14- Chief organizational task must be to secure organizational unity of the proletariat

The most important distinguishing character of Marxist internationalism in its approach towards "national question" is in the field of organisation. Extending the meaning of national self-determination to the point of organising the proletariat on the basis of national divisions is nothing but narrow-minded national-

ism. The essential platform of the revolutionary organisation of the proletariat of the oppressed and oppressor nation should be a single revolutionary world party and not separate national parties.

A national liberation organisation can by no means substitute revolutionary class party. The need for revolutionary class organisation of the proletariat cannot be eliminated through national liberation organisations. The basic question is: Class unity of the proletariat or national unity on the basis of national liberation struggle? This is exactly the field where the difference between the goal of the proletarian revolution and of national liberation is exposed. Liberation struggle of the oppressed nation may turn out to come up before a proletarian revolution that would embrace proletarians of both oppressor and oppressed nations. However, this does not raise a national liberation struggle to the level of a proletarian revolution.

15- Criticising nationalism of the oppressed nation should not serve oppressor nation chauvinism

The essence of the internationalist education of the proletariat on national question is to prevent national differences and inequalities (distinction between oppressor and oppressed nation) from hindering the unity of the working class. The goal of the revolutionary proletariat is to overcome bourgeois nationalism and create a real unity of fight and brotherhood between proletarians from every nation.

However, the character of bourgeois nationalism changes under different historical conditions. Nationalism of the oppressed nation cannot be equated with repressive, rabid chauvinism of the oppressor nation. For this reason, communists of oppressor nation should never let their criticism towards nationalism of the oppressed nation overshadow the chauvinism of oppressor nation.

16- Raising the demand of “national cultural autonomy” against the right of nations to self-determination is unacceptable

Implementation of the demand of national self-determination under capitalism generally requires political struggle and organisation of the oppressed nation. This situation leads to changes in political balances and revolutionary turmoil not only within the oppressed nation but also within the oppressor nation.

For this reason bourgeois liberals, reformist and chauvinist socialists of the oppressor nation try to water down (denying the right to establish a separate state)

the national liberation struggle by putting forward the demand of “national cultural autonomy” in place of national self-determination. By this way they want to undermine the revolutionary position of the proletariat on the national question and cloud its viewpoint.

A reflection of the same attitude can also be seen among the bourgeois and reformist socialists of the oppressed nation. They wish a “resolution” of national question by various compromises, partial reforms (education in mother language, developing native culture etc.) and not arousing working masses too much, instead of national self-determination, that is by waging a struggle against the bourgeoisie of the oppressor nation.

Marxist programme on national question already includes justified demands like education in mother tongue of the oppressed nation. Therefore the programme of the revolutionary proletariat opposes the tendency to replace national self-determination with the demand of “national cultural autonomy”, taking refuge behind such justifiable demands.

Because, unless the political solution is defended in its entirety, that is unless national self-determination is implemented, national question will actually remain to exist and continue to be a barrier on the way to unity of the oppressor and oppressed nation proletariat. That’s why the programme of the revolutionary proletariat is against liberal chatters like “national cultural autonomy” which serves to put a real political solution out of the agenda.

The Viewpoint of the Proletariat on Defence of National Culture

1- The demand for educating and raising consciousness of workers on the basis of national cultural differences prevents the class from assimilating an international revolutionary culture and eventually serves bourgeois nationalism. And ideas like preserving national culture under the revolutionary power of the working class can only be attractive for petty-bourgeois leftism whose one leg rests on a pseudo socialism and the other on bourgeois nationalism.

Every national culture is made of different elements depending on the class divide, the character of class struggles within that nation and the impact of these struggles on the society. Depending on the level of economic and political development it involves feudal-reactionary, imperialist-chauvinist, bourgeois democratic and socialist cultural elements in different compositions. But whatever the composition, in the final analysis the dominant culture of a society is the culture of the ruling class. Thus the "national culture" is generally the culture inculcated by big landowners, the bourgeoisie and the religious caste. Thus defending the national culture is not the problem of the proletariat. Demanding that the proletariat who aims to create a social order without classes and exploitation on a world scale reconcile with feudal provincialism or bourgeois nationalism or its tail-ender petty-bourgeois nationalism on defence of culture means demanding rolling back the wheel of history.

2- There are two main tendencies of capitalism. First the development capitalism leads to the birth of national movements and bourgeois democratic struggles to establish nation states. This tendency makes possible for the bourgeois culture to carry in cultural elements to the society, which are progressive in comparison to the past. But it is not only "progressive" elements that comes with the bourgeois-

sie in its process of rising to the level of ruling class. This process is also marked by its conciliations with reaction in varying degrees (depending on the transition from feudalism to capitalism is accompanied by radical bourgeois democratic revolutions or takes place in a Prussian way), with religious caste, repression exerted on oppressed classes and nations and, most important of all, the fact that the bourgeoisie itself is an exploiting class (which means a lot of reactionary elements). Therefore although the bourgeois culture involves progressive elements compared with the past, the proletariat can accept only the progressive elements and must reject the reactionary elements.

The second tendency of capitalism is the development of economic life that destroys various barriers between nations with the need of internationalisation of capital. However, this tendency under capitalism in its imperialist stage and unless capitalism is surpassed by a working class revolution, is driving humanity into barbarism and decadence. Therefore it would surely be wrong to examine the capitalist trend only from the angle of economic development and describe it as “progressive”.

3- The response of the working class to the advocates of “national culture” is a defence of international culture which will be created by the world revolutionary working class movement. This culture is a synthesis of the cultural heritage of humanity and democratic and socialist elements of various national cultures. While defence of “national culture” serves nothing but reinforcing bourgeois nationalism, the idea of proletarian internationalism adopted to all languages and local characteristics can pave the way to socialism.

4- In conclusion, tendency to give the proletariat a national consciousness is a reactionary one. And it has been the attitude of all petty-bourgeois revolutionary leaderships who, on the one hand, proclaim themselves as “Marxist-Leninist” and on the other hand defend “national culture” in their all ideological and political practice. Rejecting the defence of “national culture” as part of proletarian internationalism is not only the task of the communists of the oppressing nation. This task is equally up to the communists of the oppressed nation.

Underestimation of Democratic Demands

An erroneous political tendency within Marxist movement still encountered

1- How general democratic demands concerning wide toiling masses and the proletariat's goal of socialism should be linked is a problem that aroused many important debates and serious differences within Marxist movement.

While accepting that imperialist era is politically a period of reaction, Lenin did not conclude that the importance of democratic demands diminished. On the contrary, the fact that democracy has increasingly become a dream in the imperialist era increased the importance of democratic demands for the toiling masses. Proceeding from this fact Lenin called for an utmost interest towards developing a revolutionary policy and programme in relation to the question of linking the struggle of broad masses for democratic demands and proletariat's goal of socialism in its struggle for power.

Lenin pointed out to "the problem of transition to proletarian revolution" and wanted communists to think over this problem seriously in the second congress of the Comintern (1920). He was pointing to the fact that the problem of revolution cannot be solved simply by winning over the vanguard of the proletariat to the idea of proletarian dictatorship and that ways, methods, programmatic formulations and demands which draw the mass of the proletariat and other toiling layers to revolutionary struggle under the hegemony of the proletariat must be found.

The chain broke at this point because of Lenin's illness and death and the rise of

Stalinism. “The problem of transition” could enter again the agenda of communists only with the 1938 Transition Programme that Trotsky wrote as part of his efforts to build the Fourth International.

Lenin put forward a general approach we find still relevant while he was criticising the tendency to underestimate the struggle for democracy in the imperialist era:

“Capitalism and imperialism can be overthrown only by economic revolution. They cannot be overthrown by democratic transformations, even the most “ideal”. But a proletariat not schooled in the struggle for democracy is incapable of performing an economic revolution.”⁴

“The Marxist solution of the problem of democracy is for the proletariat to utilise all democratic institutions and aspirations in its class struggle against the bourgeoisie in order to prepare for its overthrow and assure its own victory.”⁵

“We must combine the revolutionary struggle against capitalism with a revolutionary programme and tactics on all democratic demands: a republic, a militia, the popular election of officials, equal rights for women, the self-determination of nations, etc. While capitalism exists, these demands—all of them—can only be accomplished as an exception, and even then in an incomplete and distorted form.”⁶

2- Polish Marxists like Rosa Luxemburg, Radek (or Russian ones like Pyatakov Bukharin) legitimately opposed the conception of the Second International separating the minimum and maximum programmes. However they went too far to an erroneous point of completely underestimating the democratic demands that would serve as a lever for a transition to the proletarian revolution. Lenin named this political tendency as “imperialist economism” and criticised in a way that is still relevant today.

According to Lenin’s assessment the imperialist economism did not manage to link the struggle for reforms and democracy with the birth of imperialism just as “late” economism (that of early 19.th century) could not link the fight for democracy with the birth of capitalism.

4 Reply to Kievsky, CW. 23, p. 25

5 *ibid.* p. 26

6 The Revolutionary Proletariat and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination, CW 21. p. 408

Imperialism is the period in which the capital outgrows the borders of national states. Rosa Luxemburg etc. interpreted possible results of this economic development in a mechanical way. According to them since development was towards merging of nations it was unnecessary to defend the freedom of secession of nations and recognise this under proletariat's power. Thus they argued against including the right of nations to self-determination in the party programme. Lenin on the contrary thought that revolutionary fight for socialism had to be combined with a revolutionary programme on the national question as in all other democratic tasks.

Lenin's criticisms against those Marxists who defend the thesis that "the right of nations to self-determination is impossible under capitalism and unnecessary under socialism" are important from two points of view. First is the stressing of the point that the right of nations to self-determination is a political right. Of course under capitalism these political rights have not been, and could not have been, granted automatically. Serious reforms have largely been by-products of revolutionary struggle of masses against bourgeoisie. It would be completely wrong for the revolutionary proletariat to approach the question of the right of nations to self-determination in a reasoning of "impossible under capitalism". Second, the revolutionary proletariat would strive to gain hegemony in a political fight by including this type of demands which could turn into an important lever to mobilise broad masses into its programme.

Another important point in Lenin's criticisms of imperialist economism is the following: To say that "the right of nations to self-determination is useless in socialism" (by "socialism" he means in a careless way the dictatorship of the proletariat) would be to fall into a lightminded way of thinking that the discrimination between oppressed and oppressor nations created through ages and its deep effects can simply be washed away with the proletarian revolution once and for all, spontaneously and without any effort. Any lack of attention to this question would result in nothing but helping to sustain and even deepen in practice the negative imprints of oppressor nation chauvinism.

3- Therefore Lenin considered it absolutely necessary for the proletariat in power to recognise the right of oppressed nations to self-determination. The Bolshevik Party under Lenin's leadership defended to implement this right immediately after the October Revolution and the resolution of the II. Congress of the Soviets to recognise the right of nations to self-determination were further clarified by the principles determined by the Committee of People's Commissars ("Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia" dated 15 November 1917):

- “1. The equality and sovereignty of the peoples of Russia.
2. The right of the peoples of Russia to free self-determination, even to the point of secession and the formation of an independent state.
3. The abolition of any and all national and national-religious privileges and disabilities.
4. The free development of national minorities and ethnographic groups inhabiting the territory of Russia.”⁷

Lenin defended that the principle “merging of nations is possible only through voluntary association” could be implemented by the proletarian power taking measures in favour of the oppressed nation and that real equality could only by this way be achieved. He expressed his view on this point in a sharp warning against the danger of “Great Russian chauvinism” which arose among Bolsheviks:

“In my writings on the national question I have already said that an abstract presentation of the question of nationalism in general is of no use at all. A distinction must necessarily be made between the nationalism of an oppressor nation and that of an oppressed nation, the nationalism of a big nation and that of a small nation.

“In respect of the second kind of nationalism we, nationals of a big nation, have nearly always been guilty, in historic practice, of an infinite number of cases of violence...

“That is why internationalism on the part of oppressors or “great” nations, as they are called (though they are great only in their violence, only great as bullies), must consist not only in the observance of the formal equality of nations but even in an inequality of the oppressor nation, the great nation, that must make up for the inequality which obtains in actual practice. Anybody who does not understand this has not grasped the real proletarian attitude to the national question, he is still essentially petty bourgeois in his point of view and is, therefore, sure to descend to the bourgeois point of view.”⁸

4- What lies beneath the mistake of some Marxists Lenin accused of being fallen into a tendency of imperialist economism was reducing political problems directly to economy and thinking that by removing the economic base problems it creates would automatically disappear. It is true that in the last analysis economic

7 <http://marxists.anu.edu.au/history/ussr/government/1917/11/02.htm>

8 The Question of Nationalities or “Autonomisation”, CW 36, p.607-8

base determines everything. But to proceed from this fact to ignore the complexity of political problems and interpret the dialectical relationship between economic base and political effects in a mechanical way is a caricature of Marxism.

Those Marxists who fell into this mistake, starting from the impossibility of economic independence except the proletarian world revolution carried it as such to the political sphere. In short, on the question of the right of nations to self-determination they confuse the question of political independence of nation-states with the question of economic dependence. It is sure that a complete elimination of national oppression is possible only under proletarian power. But this in no way changes the meaning of the right of nations to self-determination which is the right of secession of an oppressed nation from the oppressor nation, i.e. the right of establishing its own nation-state achieving its political independence. It is known that imperialist countries, because they have the economic means of applying pressure on small countries, may stop resisting too much against the demand of independence on the part of small nations when they find it too costly, or find it useful to divide a region into tiny nation-states.

It is a clear fact that imperialist countries continue, through economic means, to keep under pressure nations that have achieved their own nation-states but are weak economically. But the right of nations to self-determination should not be considered in this context. The struggle in these countries cannot be described with reference to the national question unless there is an open imperialist annexation.

It is also a caricature of Marxism not to take the demand of the right of nations to self-determination in a clearest way as “political independence, the right to establish a separate state” and think that economic independence can also be achieved⁹ by a national liberation struggle.

Imperialism is a world system that links all nation-states large or small to each other through diverse (and of course unequal) economic relations. For this reason, to defend that nation-states can even be fully independent in an economic sense despite the imperialist system is not overthrown by proletarian revolutions progressing on a world scale is a distortion of Marxism. In conclusion we have to point out once again that we must understand from national liberation nothing but achieving political independence. Economic liberation is a matter of social revolution.

9 Such as the political views which, in Turkey, found their typical expression in the slogan of “a fully independent and really democratic Turkey”, which was part of the conception of national democratic revolution.