

# How the revolutionary wave of 1917-23 was weakened by support for "national liberation" movements

4943 reads

The Kurdish tragedy is the latest demonstration of the bloody barbarity brought about by so-called 'national liberation' struggles.

The United States, Great Britain, Turkey, Iran, all the different imperialist protagonists who brought about the outrage of the Gulf War, encouraged the Kurds in one way or the other to rise up in armed insurrection for their 'national liberation'. Now we can see how they left Saddam Hussein to crush them and cast them into exile.

They are all accomplices to this genocidal slaughter and they have all used 'national liberation' as a fig leaf for their imperialist ambitions. In this pack of dogs we have to include the Kurdish leaders who have made an agreement with the Butcher of Baghdad to reduce 'national independence' to the 'first step' of 'autonomy', a 'first step' that also took place in 1970, 1975, and 1981...!

Capitalism has entered its final phase: decomposition. A phase in which wars like that in the Gulf and ethnic-nationalist massacres like those in Yugoslavia and the USSR, or the killings between the Arabs and Kurds in Iraq, will increasingly proliferate. Both take place under the same banner of 'national liberation' which, in many cases, is the cynical disguise for the imperialist ambitions of different states, especially the great powers; in the other cases it is just an irrational drunkenness which carries away the brutalised and desperate masses. In both it is an expression of the mortal bankruptcy of the capitalist order, of the threat it represents to the survival of humanity.

Against all of this, only the proletariat can offer a perspective of reorganising society around social relations based on the real unification of humanity, on production dedicated to the full satisfaction of human needs; in sum, a world community of free and equal human beings who work with and for each other.

In order to orient its struggles around this perspective the proletariat must clearly reject the whole ideology of 'national liberation', which serves only to tie it to the old society [1] [3]. In the first part of this article we are going to analyse how, in the revolutionary experience of 1917-23, this mystification represented a crucial factor in the failure of the revolution and provided the capitalist states with a means of salvation that resulted in a tragic procession of war and barbarity, the price mankind has paid for the survival of the capitalist regime over the last 70 years.

The Second Congress of the Communist International (March 1920) adopted the 'Theses on the national and colonial question' whose basic idea was: *"All events in world politics are necessarily concentrated on one central point, the struggle of the world bourgeoisie against the Russian Soviet Republic, which is rallying around itself both the soviet movements among the advanced workers in*

*all countries, and all the national liberation movements in the colonies and amongst the oppressed peoples, convinced by bitter experience that there is no salvation for them except in union with the revolutionary proletariat and in the victory of Soviet power over world imperialism"* (Documents of the Communist International, ed J Degras, page 138).

This hope was quickly refuted by events from the beginning of the Russian Revolution. The policy of support for 'national liberation' struggles practiced by the CI and the proletarian bastion in Russia created a barrier against the international extension of the proletarian revolution and fundamentally weakened the consciousness and unity of the international proletariat, contributing to the failure of its revolutionary efforts.

## **A noose around the neck of the Russian Revolution**

The October revolution was the first step in the revolutionary movement of the proletariat on a world scale: *"That the Bolsheviks have based their policy entirely upon the world proletarian revolution is the clearest proof of their political farsightedness and firmness of principle and of the bold scope of their politics"* (Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution' in Rosa Luxemburg Speaks, Pathfinder Press, page 368)

In accordance with this thinking, where the essential issue was the international extension of the revolution, support for national liberation movements in the countries oppressed by the great metropolitan imperialists was seen as a tactic for winning additional support for the world revolution.

From October 1917, the Bolsheviks pushed for the independence of the countries which the Czarist empire had kept subjugated: the Baltic countries, Finland, Poland, the Ukraine, Armenia etc... They believed that such an attitude would guarantee the revolutionary proletariat indispensable support for its efforts to retain power while waiting for the maturation and explosion of the proletarian revolution in the great European countries, especially Germany. These hope were never to be fulfilled:

- Finland: the Soviet government recognised its independence on the 18th of December 1917. The working class movement in this country was very strong: it was on the revolutionary ascent, it had strong links with the Russian workers and had actively participated in the 1905 and 1917 revolutions. It was not a question of a country dominated by feudalism, but a very developed capitalist territory. And the Finnish bourgeoisie used the Soviet power's gift in order to crush the workers' insurrection that broke out in January 1918. This struggle lasted nearly 3 months but, despite the resolute support the Soviets gave to the Finnish workers, the new state was able to destroy the revolutionary movement, thanks to German troops whom they called on to help them;

- The Ukraine: the local nationalist movement did not represent a real bourgeois movement, but rather obliquely expressed the vague resentments of the peasants against the Russian landlords and above all the Poles. The proletariat in this region came from all over Russia and was very developed. In these conditions the band of nationalist adventurers that set up the 'Ukraine Rada' (Vinnickenko, Petlyura etc.) rapidly sought the patronage of German and Austrian imperialism. At the same time it dedicated all its forces to attacking the workers' soviets, which had been formed in Kharkov and other cities. The French general Tabouis who, because of the collapse of the central powers, replaced the German influence, employed Ukrainian reactionary bands in the war of the White Guards against the Soviets.

*"Ukrainian nationalism... was a mere whim, a folly of a few dozen petty bourgeois intellectuals without the slightest roots in the economic, political or psychological relationships of the country; it*

*was without any historical tradition, since the Ukraine never formed a nation or government, was without any national culture... To what was at first a mere farce they lent such importance that the farce became a matter of the most deadly seriousness - not as a serious national movement for which, afterwards as before, there are no roots at all, but as a shingle and rallying flag of counter-revolution. At Brest, out of this addled egg crept the German bayonets" (Rosa Luxemburg, idem, pages 382-2);*

- The Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania): the workers' soviets took power in this zone at the same moment as the October revolution. 'National liberation' was carried out by British marines: *"With the termination of hostilities against Germany, British naval units appeared in the Baltic. The Estonian Soviet Republic collapsed in January 1919. The Latvian Soviet Republic held out in Riga for five months and then succumbed to the threat of British naval guns" (E.H.Carr, The Bolshevik Revolution, vol. 1, page 317)*

- In Asiatic Russia, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan: *"A Bashkir government under one Validov, which had proclaimed an autonomous Bashkir state after the October revolution, went over to the Orenburg Cossacks who were in open warfare against the Soviet Government; and this was typical of the prevailing attitude of the nationalists" (idem, page 324).* For its part the 'national-revolutionary' government of Kokanda (in central Asia), with a programme that included the imposition of Islamic law, the defence of private property, and the forced seclusion of women, unleashed a fierce war against the workers' Soviet of Tashkent (the principal industrial city of Russian Turkestan).

- In Caucasia a Transcaucasian republic was formed, and its tutelage was fought over between Turkey, Germany and Great Britain. This caused it to break up into 3 'independent' republics (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan), which fiercely confronted each other, urged on in turn by each of the contesting powers. The three republics supported with all their forces the British troops in their battle against the Baku workers' Soviet, which from 1917-20 suffered bombardment and massacres by the British;

- Turkey: from the beginning the Soviet government supported the 'revolutionary nationalist' Kemal Attaturk. Radek, a member of the CI, exhorted the recently formed Turkish Communist Party thus: *"Your first task, as soon as you have formed as an independent party, will be to support the movement for the national freedom of Turkey" (Acts of the first four Congresses of the CI).* The result was a catastrophe: Kemal crushed without leniency the strikes and demonstrations of the young Turkish proletariat and, if for a time he allied with the Soviet government, it was only done to put pressure on the British troops who were occupying Constantinople, and on the Greeks who had occupied large parts of Western Turkey. However, once the Greeks had been defeated and having offered British imperialism his fidelity if they left Constantinople, Kemal broke off the alliance with the Soviets and offered the British the head of the Turkish Communist Party, which was viciously persecuted.

- The case of Poland should also be mentioned. The national emancipation of Poland was almost a dogma in the Second International. When Rosa Luxemburg, at the end of the 19th century, demonstrated that this slogan was now erroneous and dangerous since capitalist development had tightly bound the Polish bourgeoisie to the Russian Czarist imperial caste, she provoked a stormy polemic inside the International. But the truth was that the workers of Warsaw, Lodz and elsewhere were at the vanguard of the 1905 revolution and had produced revolutionaries as outstanding as Rosa. Lenin had recognised that *"The experience of the 1905 revolution demonstrated that even in these two nations (he is referring to Poland and Finland) the leading classes, the landlords and the bourgeoisie, renounced the revolutionary struggle for liberty and had looked for a rapprochement*

*with the leading classes in Russia and with the Czarist monarchy out of fear of the revolutionary proletariat of Finland and Poland"* (minutes of the Prague party conference, 1912).

Unfortunately the Bolsheviks held onto the dogma of 'the right of nations to self-determination', and from October 1917 on they promoted the independence of Poland. On 29 August 1918 the Council of Peoples Commissars declared *"All treaties and acts concluded by the government of the former Russian Empire with the government of Prussia or of the Austro-Hungarian Empire concerning Poland, in view of their incompatibility with the principle of the self-determination of nations and with the revolutionary sense of right of the Russian people, which recognises the indefeasible right of the Polish people to independence and unity, are hereby irrevocably rescinded"* (quoted in E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, vol 1, p 293).

While it was correct that the proletarian bastion should denounce and annul the secret treaties of the bourgeois government, it was a serious error to do so in the name of 'principles' which were not on a proletarian terrain, but a bourgeois one, viz the 'right of nations'. This was rapidly demonstrated in practice. Poland fell under the iron dictatorship of Pilsudski, the veteran social patriot, who smashed the workers' strikes, allied Poland with France and Britain, and actively supported the counter-revolution of the White Armies by invading the Ukraine in 1920.

When in response to this aggression the troops of the Red Army entered Polish territory and advanced on Warsaw in the hope that the workers would rise up against the bourgeoisie, a new catastrophe befell the cause of the world revolution: the workers of Warsaw, the same workers who had made the 1905 revolution, fell in behind the 'Polish Nation' and participated in the defence of the city against the soviet troops. This was the tragic consequence of years of propaganda about the 'national liberation' of Poland by the Second International and then by the proletarian bastion in Russia. [2] [2]

The outcome of this policy was catastrophic: the local proletariats were defeated, the new nations were not 'grateful' for the Bolsheviks' present and quickly passed into the orbit of British imperialism, collaborating in their blockade of the Soviet power and sustaining with all the means at their disposal the White counter-revolution which provoked a bloody civil war.

*"The Bolsheviks were to be taught to their own great hurt and that of the revolution, that under the rule of capitalism there is no self-determination of peoples, that in a class society each class of the nation strives to 'determine itself' in a different fashion, and that, for the bourgeois classes, the standpoint of national freedom is fully subordinated to that of class rule. The Finnish bourgeoisie, like the Ukrainian bourgeoisie, were unanimous in preferring the violent rule of Germany to national freedom, if the latter should be bound up with Bolshevism."* (Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*, Rosa Luxemburg Speaks, page 380)

## **National liberation will not cure national oppression**

The Bolsheviks thought that *"in order to affirm the workers' international unity it was first necessary to uproot all vestiges of the past inequality and discrimination between nations"*. Hadn't these vestiges subjected the workers of these countries to the reactionary nationalism of the Czarist empire? Didn't this create an obstacle to their unity with the Russian workers, who could be seen as accomplices to Great Russian chauvinism? Wouldn't the young proletariat of the colonial and semi-colonial countries have a hostile attitude towards the proletariat of the great metropolises as long as their countries had not become independent nations?

It is certain that capitalism did not create and organise the world market in a conscious way. It developed in a violent, anarchic manner, through antagonisms between nations. Everywhere it sowed all kinds of discrimination and oppression, particularly national, ethnic, and linguistic ones. These weighed heavily on the workers of different countries, complicating the process towards the unification and self-awareness of the class.

However, it was erroneous and dangerous to seek to solve this by encouraging the formation of new nations which - given the saturation of the world market - could have no economic viability, and would only reproduce these wounds on a much vaster scale. The experience of the peripheral peoples of the Czarist empire was conclusive. The Polish nationalists used their 'independence' to persecute the Jewish, Lithuanian and German minorities; in Caucasia, the Georgians persecuted the Armenians and the Azeris, the Armenians the Turkamens and the Azeris, while later on the latter did the same to the Armenians...; the Ukrainian Rada declared its hatred of the Russians, Poles and Jews... and these events were an omen of the terrible nightmare which has unfolded throughout capitalism's decadence: simply remember the Hindus' bloody orgy against the Muslims in 1947, that of the Croats against the Serbs during the Nazi occupation and the revenge of the latter against the former once Yugoslavia was 'liberated' by Tito. And now today we have the bloody witches' Sabbath of nationalist pogroms in Eastern Europe and Asiatic Russia. We have to be clear: 'national liberation' will not stop national oppression, but instead will reproduce it even more irrationally. It is like using petrol to put a fire out.

It is only in the proletariat, in its revolutionary being and in its struggle, that we can find the bases for combating and overcoming all the varieties of national, ethnic and linguistic discrimination engendered by capitalism: *"big industry created a class, which in all nations has the same interest and with which nationality is already dead; a class which is really rid of all the old world and at the same time stands pitted against it."* (Marx and Engels, The German Ideology)

### **National liberation pushes the non-exploiting strata into the arms of capital**

The Bolsheviks, who always based their policies on the idea of reinforcing the world revolution, thought that they could win over the non-exploiting strata of these nations - peasants, certain middle classes etc - through supporting 'national liberation' and other classical demands of the programme of the bourgeois revolutions (agrarian reform, political freedoms, etc).

These strata occupy an unstable position in bourgeois society; they're heterogeneous, without any future as such. Although oppressed by capitalism they lack any clear or defined interests of their own, and this ties them to the conservation of capitalism. The proletariat cannot win them over by offering them a platform based on 'national liberation' and other demands situated on the bourgeois terrain. Such proposals push them into the arms of the bourgeoisie who can manipulate them with demagogic promises and so turn them against the proletariat.

Clearly the demands of the bourgeois programme, which are most sensitive to the peasants and petty-bourgeoisie (agrarian reform, linguistic freedom within the national terrain, etc), have never been completed by the bourgeoisie. But in the period of capitalism's decadence the new nations are incapable of completing these demands, which clearly constitute a reactionary utopia, impossible under a capitalism that cannot expand, but is increasingly rent by violent convulsions.

Does this mean that the proletariat must take up demands which historical evolution have thrown into the dustbin, in order to demonstrate that it is more 'consistent' than the bourgeoisie?

No way! This approach, which weighed so heavily on the Bolsheviks and other revolutionary fractions, was a poisonous residue secreted by the gradualist and reformist thinking which led social

democracy to its ruin. It is a speculative and idealist vision of capitalism, which holds that it has to complete its programme 100%, and in all countries before humanity is ready for communism. This is a reactionary utopia which does not correspond to the reality of a system based on exploitation, a system whose aim is not to carry out a supposed social project but to extract surplus-value. If in the ascendant phase of capitalism the bourgeoisie usually forgot its 'programme' after it had achieved power, making frequent pacts with the remnants of the old feudal classes, once the world market was formed and capitalism entered into its historical decline, this 'programme' was converted into a vulgar mystification.

The proletariat will only open a crack in its revolutionary alternative if it attempts the realisation of 'the unfinished bourgeois programme', and the bourgeoisie will grab onto this as a means of salvation. The best way of winning over the non-exploiting strata to the proletarian cause, or at least neutralising them in the decisive confrontations with the bourgeois state, is for the working class to consistently and fully affirm its **own** programme. It is the perspective of the abolition of class privileges, the hope of a new organisation of society which will safeguard the survival of humanity; it is the clear and resolute affirmation of the proletariat as an autonomous class, as a social force that openly presents itself as a candidate to take power; it is the massive self-organisation of the class in workers' councils, that will permit the creation of a platform capable of winning over these vacillating and unstable classes.

*"Because it cannot assign itself the task of establishing new privileges, the proletariat can only base its struggles on political positions which result from its particular class programme - the proletariat represents, within the diverse classes of capitalist society, the only one able to build the society of the future. It is only on this basis that it can pull the middle social strata into the struggle. These classes will only unite with the proletariat in particular historical circumstances, when the contradictions of capitalist society blossom fully and the proletariat begins to mount its revolutionary assault. Only then will they understand the necessity of combining with the proletariat" (Bilan no 5, 'Principles: weapons of the revolution').*

### **'National liberation': a factor in the disintegration of proletarian consciousness**

The proletarian revolution is not a predestined product of objective conditions in which any expedient tactic can serve to carry it out. Although it is a historical necessity and its objective conditions have been furnished by the formation of the world market and the proletariat, the communist revolution is essentially a conscious act.

On the other hand, the proletariat, unlike past revolutionary classes, does not possess any economic power in the old society: it is at the same time an exploited and a revolutionary class. What makes it decisive and unique in history are its weapons for the destruction of the old society: its unity and consciousness, weapons that in turn constitute the foundations for the new society.

Consciousness is vital for the advance of its struggle, in which *"on each occasion, the problem that the proletariat has to confront is not one of obtaining the best advantage or the greatest number of allies, but of being coherent with the system of principles which define its class... classes must exist in an organic and political configuration without which, despite being determined by the evolution of the productive forces, it runs the risk of remaining bound for a long time by the old class which, in its turn - in order to resist - will shackle the course of economic evolution"* (Bilan no 5, idem).

From this perspective the support for 'national liberation struggles' during the revolutionary period of 1917-23 had disastrous consequences for the world proletariat, for its vanguard - the Communist International - and for the first bastion to carry out its revolutionary task: Russia.

The historical period of decisive confrontations between Capital and Labour was opened up by the First World War. In this period there is no alternative between the international proletarian revolution and the submission of the proletariat to the national interests of each bourgeoisie. Support for 'national liberation', although conceived as a 'tactical' element, led to the disintegration, corruption and decomposition of proletarian consciousness.

We have already seen that the 'liberation' of the peripheral peoples of the Czarist empire did not bring any advantage to the Russian revolution, but rather contributed to the growth of a *cordon sanitaire* around it: a group of nations with proletariats who were combative and had an old tradition were firmly closed off from the penetration of revolutionary positions, and an insurmountable abyss was opened up between the Russian and German workers.

How is it possible that the workers of Poland, the Ukraine, Finland, Baku, Riga, who had been at the forefront of the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, who engendered communist militants of the clarity and integrity of Rosa Luxemburg, Piatakov, Jogisches etc., were so rapidly defeated and crushed in 1918-20 by their own bourgeoisies and became, in many cases vehemently, opposed to the Bolsheviks' slogans?

There can be no doubt of the decisive influence of the nationalist poison: "*The mere fact that the question of national aspirations and tendencies towards separation were injected at all in the midst of the revolutionary struggle, and were even pushed into the foreground and made into the shibboleth of socialist and revolutionary policy as a result of the Brest peace, has served to bring the greatest confusion into socialist ranks and has actually destroyed the position of the proletariat in the border countries*" (Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Russian Revolution', idem, page 381).

Just as it pushed the workers of these countries towards the illusory lure of 'independence' and the 'development of the country free from the Russian yoke', 'national liberation' increasingly created a rift between them and the Russian proletariat, with whom they had shared many struggles and at times had taken the first step in decisive combats.

The International, the world communist party, is a pivotal factor in the class consciousness of the proletariat. Its clarity and coherence are vital to the strength, unity and consciousness of the proletariat. Support for 'national liberation' played a decisive role in the opportunist degeneration of the Communist International.

The Communist International was constituted on a central principle: capitalism has entered its decadent epoch, and the task of the proletariat cannot be to reform or improve it but to destroy it: "*A new epoch is born: The epoch of capitalism's decay, its internal disintegration; the epoch of the proletarian, communist revolution*" (Platform of the Communist International, 1919). However, support for 'national liberation' movements opened a very dangerous crack in this clarity, an opening towards the penetration of opportunism. It introduced into a programme aimed at the destruction of the old order a task that belonged entirely to that same old order. The tactic of combining the revolutionary struggles in the metropolises with the 'national liberation' struggles in the colonies led to the conclusion that the hour for the destruction of capitalism had not arrived yet: it implied that the world was divided into two areas (one 'ripe' for the proletarian revolution and another where capitalism still had to develop) and that capitalist expansion was still on the cards (for marxists 'national liberation' could have no other meaning than this).

This germ of confusion was an open door to the opportunism that increasingly developed with the reflux of the revolutionary struggles of the proletariat in Europe.

The party is not a passive product of the class movement, but an active factor in its development. Its clarity and determination are crucial to the outcome of the proletarian revolution; equally, its confusions, ambiguities and incoherence powerfully contribute to the confusion and defeat of the class. The evolution of the CI in its posture on the national question bears witness to this.

The 1st Congress, which took place when the revolutionary wave was at its height, posed as a task the abolition of national frontiers: *"The end result of the capitalist mode of production is chaos, which only the largest productive class, the working class, can overcome. This class must establish a real order, the communist order. It must break the domination of capital, make wars impossible, destroy all national borders, transform the whole world into a community that produces for itself, and makes brotherhood and liberation of peoples a reality"* (Platform of the CI).

In the same way, it was a given that the small states could not break the yoke of imperialism and could not but submit to its game: *"The goal of Entente policy in the vassal states and in the recently created republics (Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and also Poland, Finland and so on) is to organise national counter-revolutionary movements based on the ruling classes and social nationalists. This movement is meant to target the defeated states, maintain a balance of power among the newly created states, subordinating them to the Entente, retard revolutionary movements within the new 'national' republics, and, lastly, furnish the White guards needed for the struggle against the international revolution and the Russian revolution in particular"* ('Theses on the International Situation and the Policy of the Entente', First Congress of the CI). And, in short, it demonstrated that the national state had been condemned by history: having given a vigorous impulse to capitalist development, the nation state had become too narrow for the development of the productive forces.

Thus we can see how the First Congress of the CI laid the bases for overcoming the initial errors on the national question; but these points of clarity were not developed. Instead, because of the defeats of the proletariat and the inability of the CI majority to take them further forward, they were liquidated little by little by the dark shadow of opportunism. The Fourth Congress (1922), with its theses on the Eastern Question, marked an important step in this regression since *"proletariat and peasants were required to subordinate their social programme to the immediate needs of a common national struggle against foreign imperialism. It was assumed that a nationally minded bourgeoisie, or even a nationally minded feudal aristocracy, would be ready to conduct a struggle for national liberation from the yoke of foreign imperialism in alliance with the revolutionary proletarians and peasants, who were only waiting for the moment of victory to turn against them and overthrow them"* (E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, vol. 3, pages 477-8).

With later events, the proclamation of 'socialism in one country', the definitive defeat of the proletarian bastion in Russia and its integration into the imperialist world chain, 'national liberation' was simply turned into a cover for the vile interests of the Russian state. It has not been the only one to use this banner: other states have also adopted it in many different forms, but always towards the same end: the war to the death for the re-division of the saturated world market. These innumerable imperialist wars under the guise of 'national liberation' will be the object of the second part of this article.

Systematising the work of clarification which took place after the degeneration of the Communist International by the fractions of the communist left, the Gauche Communiste de France adopted in January 1945 a resolution on the nationalist movements which concluded thus: *"Given that the nationalist movements, due to their capitalist nature do not represent any kind of organic or ideological continuity with the class movements of the proletariat, the latter, if it is to maintain its class positions, must break with and abandon all ties with the nationalist movements"*.



[1] <sup>[3]</sup> See our pamphlet Nation or Class and articles in the International Review numbers 4, 19, 34, 37, 42 and 62.

[2] <sup>[4]</sup> On the other hand the proletarian revolution can never be extended by military methods alone, as was made clear by the Executive Committee of the Soviets: "Our enemies and yours are deceiving you when they tell you that the Soviet government wants to implant communism on Polish territory with the bayonets of the soldiers of the Red Army. A communist revolution is only possible when the immense majority of workers are convinced of the idea of creating it with their own force" ('Calling the Polish People', 28.1.20). Despite an important internal opposition - Trotsky, Kirov, etc - the Bolshevik party, increasingly devoured by opportunism and falling into a false understanding of internationalism, encouraged the adventure of the summer of 1920, which radically forgot this principle.

## Deepen:

- [Balance sheet of 70 years of "national liberation" struggles](#) <sup>[5]</sup>

## Heritage of the Communist Left:

- [The national question](#) <sup>[6]</sup>

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