

The National Question in the USSR

The national question has been a central issue in Soviet politics since the time of Lenin. By guaranteeing the peoples held captive in the Tsarist empire the right to separate and form their own states if they wished, the Bolsheviks gained important allies in the civil war that erupted after the revolution.

All the non-Russian peoples of the USSR have suffered national oppression under Stalinism. The 1979 Soviet census listed 102 nationalities, 22 of which numbered over a million. Fifteen of these have their own republics, 20 others have the lesser status of autonomous republics, and 18 more reside in autonomous regions and national areas.

The Kremlin oligarchy, saturated with Russian chauvinism, has for decades attempted to extinguish the national cultures and languages of minority nations in the USSR. Sometimes the Stalinists resorted to jailings, deportations and police repression, but a variety of more subtle techniques were also used to promote Russification. Russians make up only 50 percent of the population of the Soviet Union, yet more than 80 percent of books and newspapers are printed in Russian. Access to many branches of higher education is effectively restricted to Russian-speakers.

Faced with a resurgence of separatist sentiment across the USSR, Gorbachev has sought a "resolution" of the national question that retains all 15 republics within a unitary state. Unlike the chauvinist Soviet bureaucrats, Trotskyists are internationalists. As such we are indifferent to the question of state boundaries. Lenin made this clear in 1917:

"They tell us that Russia will be partitioned, will fall apart into separate republics, but we have no reason to fear this. However many independent republics there may be, we shall not be afraid. What is important for us is not where the state frontier passes, but that the union of workers of all nations shall be preserved for the struggle with the bourgeoisie of whatever nation."

Free and equal development for the peoples of the Soviet Union depends ultimately on the extension of the world revolution. For only through an internationally planned economy, based on workers democracy, can the material basis be laid for abolishing scarcity, which lies at the root of every form of oppression. In the USSR the international extension of the revolution is inextricably linked to the overthrow of the Russian-chauvinist Kremlin bureaucrats through proletarian political revolution. A key element in the program of such a revolution must be the intransigent defense of the equality of all nationalities and, in particular, the right of oppressed nations to self-determination.

Yet, in upholding the general democratic right of nations to self-determination, Marxists do not automatically support the demands of all nationalist currents. Separatist movements that lure the oppressed nation-

alities to embrace capitalist restoration can only result in the brutal subordination of those peoples to imperialism. It is the duty of Leninists to say so forthrightly, and to oppose such movements. This vital distinction is ignored by most of the ostensibly Trotskyist left. Instead, they have hailed the growth of nationalist movements in the USSR, regardless of the latter's attitude toward capitalist restoration.

Trotsky rejected the arguments of those "socialists" in his day who, in the name of "democracy," made national self-determination their ultimate criterion:

"The national problem separate and apart from class correlations is a fiction, a lie, a strangler's noose for the proletariat.

"...it frequently happens with formalistic thinkers that while denying the *whole*, they reverently grovel before a *part*. National self-determination is one of the elements of democracy. The struggle for national self-determination, like the struggle for democracy in general, plays an enormous role in the lives of the peoples, particularly in the life of the proletariat. He is a poor revolutionist who does not know how to utilize democratic institutions and forms, including parliamentarianism, in the interests of the proletariat. But from the proletarian standpoint, neither democracy as a whole nor national self-determination as an integral part of it stands above the classes; nor does either of them supply the highest criterion of revolutionary policy."

—"Defense of the Soviet Republic and the Opposition," 1929

Addressing the resurgence of Ukrainian nationalism in the 1930s, Trotsky proposed that the call for an "Independent Soviet Ukraine" could drive a wedge between those who stood for capitalist restoration and those who simply opposed the Kremlin oligarchy's chauvinist attempts to Russify the Ukraine. This slogan was a clear statement of opposition to capitalist counterrevolution, even when it wore a cloak of resistance to national oppression. It also served to link the struggle against national oppression to the struggle against the parasitic Stalinist ruling caste.

Lithuania: Nationalism and Social Counterrevolution

Today within the Soviet Union the national question is posed most sharply in the Baltics. In March 1990, Lithuania declared its independence from the Soviet Union. The bourgeois-nationalist Lithuanian *Sajudis* government is openly committed to regaining the republic's prewar status as an imperialist satellite on the edge of the USSR. The imperialists, in turn, have loudly proclaimed their support for Lithuanian self-determination.

Chronic economic mismanagement and corruption, overlaid with bureaucratic and national oppression,

have, in the absence of an organized socialist opposition, turned the nationalist movements throughout the USSR into vehicles for the generalized hostility toward Stalinism. One striking result of the referendum endorsing independence held in Lithuania last February was that “more than half the Russians, Poles, and other minorities in the Soviet republic had voted with them [the separatists]” (*Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 17 February). This is a significant indication of the level of frustration with Moscow felt by wide layers of the Soviet population as the country slides into economic chaos. Tragically, this sentiment has translated into widespread resignation to the “inevitability” of capitalist restoration as the only way out of the present morass.

Faced with this situation, the centrist League for a Revolutionary Communist International (LRCI) argues that revolutionaries must go along with the pro-capitalist independence movement because the majority of Lithuanian workers want it. In a polemic with our comrades, the LRCI’s German section wrote:

“We say: for an independent workers state, let the masses go through their own experience with these false leaders. If we stay neutral, let alone support the attempts of the central government to maintain their rule, we will push the masses much more into the hands of radical right-wing elements. Of course there is the immediate danger of capitalist counterrevolution. But we can fight it best by cutting the ground from under the feet of the bourgeois forces....”

—“Kritik und Phrase”

This is a typical example of centrist confusionism. The call for “an independent workers state” serves as a left cover for the LRCI’s capitulation to the “false [i.e., pro-capitalist] leaders.” The LRCI backs the bourgeois restorationists because it fears that neutrality would “push the masses” further to the right! It would never occur to these centrists to oppose the counterrevolutionary *Sajudis*.

The LRCI’s leading section (the British Workers Power grouping) is no better. They admit that a victory for the restorationist Lithuanian nationalists would mean disaster for the workers who, “would suffer as Lithuania fell into semi-colonial servitude” (“Let Lithuania Go!” *Workers Power*, April 1990). Despite this, they flatly maintain that if it came to blows: “Within Lithu-

ania a revolutionary Trotskyist party...would bloc with the nationalists in their confrontation with Moscow, including fighting Soviet troops sent in to crush the independent republic.” Again, there is an attempt to camouflage this capitulation to the bourgeois nationalists. This time, it is a worthless promise of a “determined struggle against the nationalists if and when they move to dismantle the state owned property relations and restore capitalism.” This ignores the fact that for the pro-capitalist *Sajudis* government, secession from the USSR is a crucial and indispensable step toward dismantling state-owned property.

When Gorbachev responded to the secessionists by economically blockading Lithuania, Workers Power urged the imperialists to break the Soviet blockade. In May 1990 *Workers Power* advised: “We should demand that the British government recognises Lithuania and supplies goods requested by Lithuania without conditions.” They denounced the imperialists for offering only token support to the Baltic counterrevolutionaries.

The fight to defend proletarian property forms against capitalist counterrevolution is not counterposed to, but intimately connected with, the struggle for the right of each nation in the USSR to establish an independent socialist republic. The struggle against the Great Russian chauvinism of the Stalinist bureaucracy will be a vital factor in mobilizing for workers political revolution. Trotskyists oppose all forms of national oppression: political, economic and cultural. We also oppose the straitjacket “union” run by the Kremlin bureaucrats. In advocating the voluntary unification of the peoples of the USSR on the basis of socialist republics, revolutionists simultaneously support the right to national self-determination, i.e., the right of nations such as Lithuania to secede. This does not mean the right to establish an independent *bourgeois* state. For the Lithuanian working class, as for those of the other oppressed nationalities in the USSR, independence won through capitalist restoration would be a profound defeat. The job of Marxists is not to indulge in wishful thinking, or attempt to prettify reactionary forces, but “to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be.” For only by understanding reality is it possible to change it. ■