

Accession No. 1931/39
BPN
Class No.

"A TALE OF TWO NATIONS"

The Presentation of the National Question in South Africa

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Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, known to us all as Lenin, died sixty years ago, on the 21st of January, 1924. And just as we observed the centenary of Karl Marx's death last year, we shall proceed this year — the 60th after his death — to remember, likewise, the greatness of Lenin's ideas. In particular we shall discuss how he examined the concept of the national question and the right of nations to self-determination.

For Lenin, the right of the oppressed nations to self-determination meant the right to political separation from the oppressor nation, that is, total non-recognition of the oppressor state's claim to authority over the oppressed and the right of the oppressed to substitute a new state of their own choosing. In his theses on the national question, Lenin was mostly defending the adoption of this principle at the First Party Congress (1903) against the wrong views adopted by Rosa Luxemburg and other Polish Marxists as well as members of the Jewish Bund (Liebman and Co.). He maintained:

"By examining the historico-economic conditions of the national movements, we must inevitably reach the conclusion that self-determination of nations means political separation of these nations from alien national bodies, and the formation of an independent national state."

Of course, Lenin was not unmindful of the question of those oppressed nations within a given state organism who had no desire for geographical secession; recognition of the right to national independence is not synonymous with insistence on geographical secession as a principle. Quite certainly, one may be an exponent of national independence but be a bitter enemy of geographical fragmentation — the fundamental principle, Lenin pointed out, is the demand for self-determination, and this demand "is not the equivalent of a demand for separation, fragmentation and the formation of small states." This is quite understandable because the people, proceeding from their daily experience, know very well the value of geographical and economic ties and the advantages of a single market and a single state which capitalism has already brought about, as a historical step forward from feudal seclusiveness and absence of common economic life. The people will, therefore, resort to geographic secession (that is, as a matter of principle) "only when national oppression and national friction make joint life absolutely intolerable and hinder any and all economic intercourse."

Equally, there can be no question of discussing the national question in South Africa without taking into account the dynamic historico-concrete social conditions. Any analysis of the national question in our country must necessarily recognise that basically national relations have their roots in the economic system based on private ownership of the social instruments and means of production, and that consequently relations between our two nations and different nationalities have their origin in history, and are determined by the social and state system and the balance of class forces both inside the country and internationally.

From this approach Lenin demonstrated (like Marx and Engels before him) how national oppression can be done away with by removing the main economic cause. The proletariat — a class which has no private property, that is essentially neither Indian, Coloured nor African, instead which is profoundly internationalist in nature — will then defend and implement the policy of full and unconditional unity, including organisational unity, of the workers of the oppressed nation and those of the oppressor nation; furthermore, on gaining control of political power, the working class will proceed to fuse into a single South African nation, the present White oppressor and Black oppressed nations.

Talking of the class nature of the national question does not, of course, mean equating the national question with the social question. Critics of Marxism often accuse us of reducing the question of nationalities to only class relations. This is an unfair accusation! Marxists do not deny national features and other ethnic peculiarities in any historical community of people; but what we do not deny, either, is the interconnection between classes and nations, that is, the social content of relations between nations. We observe, quite objectively, that in capitalist countries today, despite much achievement in science and production and despite political rhetoric to the contrary, national conflicts, inequality and mistrust are based on the economic system and the capitalist relations of production. That is why, Marx noted 'On Poland', only the "proletarian victory removes the economic and social causes of conflicts and hostility between nationalities."¹

Historico-economic conditions of the national question in South Africa

Among the more interesting of recent discoveries in archaeology are the fossils of the Australopithecus (Man-Ape of the South) in South and East Africa which suggests that it was actually here that man evolved — and whether this be wrong or right, it nevertheless makes nonsense of the racist theories and beliefs that Whites claim South Africa by right of first occupancy against the present African people. This piece of evidence, among others as well, shatters the "mystery" of the fortresses, temples, palaces and sites of ancient mineral workings — copper, gold, iron — spread over present South Africa, which stand marvellously as an indigenous African achievement, obviously baffling the racist cynics of our history who believe them to have been built by a vanished people. For the racist historians, it is altogether inconceivable that African people can ever have had craftsmen skilled enough to build so splendidly — and they say about the Zimbabwe ruins (one of the so-called wonders of the world): "Ag jong, this was probably built by the Phoenicians." Thus in South Africa, like the rest of the continent, our colonisers sought one excuse after another to justify their seizure of territories and robbing our peasant ancestors of their land and compelling them to take up wage labour; and correspondingly, laws were enacted to sanctify this system of land tenure and forced labour. "This overall political power," concluded the late Jack Woddis in one of the studies on colonialism he made in 1972, "was directed to two main objectives — to keep the colonial people in political subjection and to make possible the maximum exploitation of the people and the country's resources."²

(a) The Imperialist Policy of Colonialism

As long as capitalism remains what it is, wrote Lenin in *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, surplus capital will be utilised not for the purpose of raising the standard of living of the masses in a given country, for this would mean the decline in profits for the capitalists, but for the purpose of increasing profits — by exporting capital abroad to the backward countries. In these economically backward countries profits are obviously high, because capital is scarce, the price of land is usually measured by sheer superiority of war materials of the colonising party over the indigenous people, wages are low and raw materials very cheap. Capitalism now found that the old national states, without whose formation it could not have overthrown feudalism, were too cramped for it. Capitalism in these states had developed concentration to such a degree that whole branches of industry were controlled by syndicates, trusts and associations of capitalist multimillionaires, with the entire world divided up among the "lords of capital" in the form of colonies. Free trade and competition had been superseded by a striving towards monopolies, the seizure of territory for the investment of capital and as sources of raw materials and so on. Lenin said:

"Capitalism has grown into the world system of colonial oppression and of the financial strangulation of the overwhelming majority of the population of the world by a handful of 'advanced' countries."³

In Holland, following the amalgamation of Dutch provinces (situated on the then trading crossroads of Europe) the Dutch East India Company received its charter in 1602, with the government holding a large share in the Company and some of the legislators being themselves directors. The government leased to the Company a monopoly of trade and took a cut of the profits. Policy direction lay with the Governing Council of Seventeen, selected from the list submitted by the Estates of the Provinces. Behaving within its domain much as a sovereign state, the Company sent out expeditions of exploration, acquired colonies and fought wars in defence of its commercial empire.

The colonisation of South Africa began with the arrival in Table Bay of Van Riebeeck to carry out the Dutch Company's instructions. Subsequently the people of the metropolis (later to include English and French) emigrated to what was an already colonised country. This settler White community systematically conquered every bit of our territory with fire and sword, subjecting us to economic exploitation, using us as 'live tools', and in this way establishing themselves as a ruling and oppressing nation over us.

The political, economic and social structure of present South Africa rests on the foundation of the colonial subjugation and enslavement of the Africans. To maintain and perpetuate this structure is the fundamental policy of all sections of the White ruling class. Often, when we hear some people claiming that South Africa is, unlike formerly colonised Angola, Mozambique or Zimbabwe, an independent and truly sovereign state, we the oppressed genuinely marvel at this misreading of history. For whom is South Africa independent? When did South Africa decolonise? Who, then, had been colonised in 1652, and who subsequently has gained his independence? Certainly not the White settler community! The Black people, at present fighting for national independence and self-determination, victims of colonialism since the arrival of the Dutch East India Company, have never experienced decolonisation. The main aim of our struggle, up till this moment, is the decolonisation of South Africa, the national liberation of the oppressed Black nation.

(b) The Special Features of Colonialism In South Africa

What are the basic features of colonialism? Are such features to be found in South Africa? Obviously, national oppression in itself does not presume colonisation. National conflicts and racial inequality are found in many countries that can hardly be called colonised.

The political essence of colonialism is the direct and overall subordination of one country to another on the basis of state power being in the hands of the dominating foreign power. As pointed out by Jack Woddis in the already cited study on colonialism,

"thus European officials, sometimes accompanied by European-staffed governments and European (or mainly European) assemblies, were the constitutional powers in the colonies. These were protected by European armies or sometimes armies of indigenous troops under European officers. The judges were Europeans and the laws were laid down by Europeans. The prisons were in the hands of Europeans, and so were the higher ranks in the civil administration. Education was controlled by Europeans, based on European history and culture, and limited to the general economic, social and political requirements of the colony-owning power. European missionaries introduced Christianity in competition with the existing religions of the local peoples. Press and other propaganda media were in the hands of Europeans... This was clearly reflected in the laws and Government decrees."

This was the case in Kenya, Congo, Angola, Mozambique, etc. And in order to maintain this profitable system, the colonial powers prevented the industrialisation of the colonies. They had no interest in creating modern industry because their aim was to exploit the resources — raw materials and cheap labour — to feed their own industrial machines in Europe. In our

continent only Ethiopia and Liberia, by the beginning of the present century, remained sovereign African states. During this century the struggle against colonialism, which became such a major phenomenon in the political history of Africa, led ultimately to the formation of the Organisation of African Unity, which accepted into its membership every new independent African state that had freed itself from colonialism. The OAU proceeds from the correct premise that the whole continent was a historical victim of sub-division and national subjugation by European countries, particularly following the Treaty of Berlin in 1885 which concluded the division of the African continent by the European powers.

A look at the South African political phenomenon immediately calls to mind the characteristics of colonialism as it existed everywhere else in the world — land dispossession, political enslavement, absence of basic democracy for the indigenous people, absence of economic leverage for progress, cultural suffocation and an ideology to sanctify this state of oppression. This is exactly why we, the colonised people, will never abandon our birthright to the ownership and control of the whole territory of South Africa; this is why we assert our right to national independence and self-determination, to choose what kind of future we and our children shall have.

The Republic of South Africa is unquestionably a colonial power and apartheid is a colonial system designed to maintain the pattern of colonial political and economic life. In South Africa colonialism changed its form somewhat, while not altering its essence: the settler colonial community completely severed its cultural ties with the metropolis, assuming a new culture based in the new conditions of the African continent. Yet political domination and economic exploitation continued as in other classical colonies.

The unique level of industrialisation, the creation of modern industry in the South African territory, as distinct from the far away metropolis, rightly characterises the South African political phenomenon as internal colonialism. Our oppressor nation is in the same country with us the colonised and oppressed Black nation. As in all classical colonial situations, we Blacks are not allowed to build up industry in competition with the colonisers. The apartheid 'Republic' has been chosen by and represents only the white fifth of the population of our country. It is an apartheid 'Republic' that exists to advance the sole and exclusive interests of this minority.

Proceeding to counsel the socialists belonging to the oppressor nations, Lenin said:

"A socialist of any of the oppressor nations ... who does not recognise and does not struggle for the right of oppressed nations to self-determination (i.e. the right to secession) is in reality a chauvinist, not a socialist... Only this point of view can lead to a consistent application of the principle of combatting any form of the oppression of nations; it removes mistrust among the proletarians of the oppressor and oppressed nations, makes for a united international struggle for the socialist revolution..." (Lenin, *The Question of Peace*).⁴

The championing of this right to political independence, to self-determination, far from encouraging the formation of small and petty states (as the Bantustan ideologists are attempting to do in their counter-historical march), on the contrary promotes the national formation of one South African state that shall be more in keeping with economic development. Of course we want to unite with our white countrymen, but as equals, not as masters and servants! Of course we want to merge into a single South African nation, but on the basis of democracy! Only this can dispel the distrust the Black people in general and the Black workers in particular have and the anger which these workers of the oppressed nation feel towards the workers of the White oppressor nation — the "labour lieutenants of the capitalist class" — so that finally this distrust and anger will be replaced by a conscious and voluntary alliance.

We reject state privileges for the White oppressor nation. We demand true national independence, a true national state. South Africa belongs to all who live in it, Black and White, and no nation can be free if it oppresses other nations. The White working class in South Africa cannot itself achieve its historic aims and be free from the systematic exploitation by capital so long as it still festers with these racial prejudices, so long as it still occupies a seat at the political ruling table of the capitalist class over the Black nation. It is this nationalism of the oppressor nation, in fact, that is the principal obstacle to democracy and to the struggle of the working class for socialism.

(c) The Capitalist Development of the South African Colony

The export of capital influences and greatly accelerates the development of capitalism in those countries to which it is exported. As Lenin remarked in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*:

"While, therefore, the export of capital may tend to a certain extent to arrest development in the capital-exporting countries, it can only do so by expanding and deepening the further development of capitalism throughout the world."⁵

The internal colonialism in South Africa provided, in an unprecedented way, the accumulation of capital for the capitalist ruling class in the colony itself. The discovery of fabulous rich mineral resources beneath the soil:

diamonds in Griqualand West (1870), gold on the Witwatersrand (1888) brought about not only the ascendancy of monopoly finance capital in South Africa but also the splitting of the society into two opposite classes, namely, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Workers, both black and white, flocked to the diggings from all over the country, from Europe and even from America whilst on the other hand, the new-rich gold and diamond millionaires, backed by powerful financial institutions in Britain and elsewhere, consolidated immense political power through the South African state.

By 1906 the labour force consisted of 94,000 African, 51,000 Chinese (who were repatriated by 1907) and 18,000 Whites (mainly European immigrants). The mines frequently became the theatre of fierce and often bloody class struggles, with the workers demanding trade union recognition (as in May, 1913, when 68,000 Rand miners downed tools demanding an eight-hour working day). The mining millionaires, supported by the government, broke these strikes using police and troops and killing a number of workers in street clashes.

This development of trade unionism was accompanied by the formation of working class political associations with more or less clearly defined socialist objectives, and culminated, eventually, in the formation of the Communist Party of South Africa at a conference in Cape Town in 1921. The conference adopted the manifesto which pledged the newly-born Party to struggle despite any sacrifices it may be called upon to undergo, to hasten the time

* "when mankind shall no longer cower under the bludgeon of the oppressor, when the necessities and amenities of life, the comfort and culture, the honour and the power shall be to him who toils, not him who exploits; when none shall be called master and none servant, but all shall be fellow-workers in common."

This South African capitalist society, however, had certain national imperfections which rendered the immediate achievement of these noble goals impossible. Despite the contradiction between social production and private appropriation, despite the exploitation of labour by capital, the South African White labour movement, typical of the general attitude of the workers of the oppressor nation anywhere, showed an intolerant attitude to their black class brothers. It is true that a revolutionary tendency was also present, leading to the formation in 1915 of the International Socialist League, the predecessor of the Communist Party itself. But the predominant organised White labour force, as it still is to this day, was imbued with the racial chauvinism and aggressive bourgeois nationalism of their "own" capitalist class. As the South African White working class developed, their

political reaction was strengthened and fostered by the national enslavement of the Blacks, in return for a privileged position in political, economic and social pastures. As Lenin remarked:

"Aggressive bourgeois nationalism, which drugs the minds of the workers, stultifies and disunites them in order that the bourgeoisie may lead them by the halter..." (See *Critical Remarks on the National Question*).

Again, let us remember how Lenin lamented about this unfortunate situation for the proletarian struggle at the Seventh Congress of the Second International in Stuttgart, held from August 18 to 24, 1907:

"Only the proletarian class, which maintains the whole of society, can bring about the social revolution. However, as a result of the extensive colonial policy, the European proletarian partly finds himself in a position when it is not his labour, but the labour of the practically enslaved natives in the colonies, that maintains the whole society. The British bourgeoisie, for example, derives more profit from the many millions of the population of India and other colonies than from the British workers. In certain countries this provides the material and economic basis for infecting the proletariat with colonial chauvinism. Of course, this may be only a temporary phenomenon, but the evil must nonetheless be clearly realised and its causes understood in order to be able to rally the proletariat of all countries for the struggle against such opportunism."⁶

Equally, when we examine the attitudes and national sentiments of the working class of the oppressed nation, we observe that the age-old oppression of the colonised nation has aroused distrust in this nation in general, even in its proletariat (as already indicated). That is why

"it is therefore the duty of the class conscious communist proletariat of all countries to regard with particular caution and attention the survivals of national sentiments in the countries and among the nationalities which have been oppressed the longest; it is equally necessary to make certain concessions with a view to more rapidly overcoming this distrust and these prejudices."

As already pointed out, the White working class will never itself be free until the Black people are freed from the yoke of colonialist White supremacy; and furthermore, the unity of the Black and White workers in the struggle for socialism will remain a pipe-dream unless the white workers recognise the right of the Black nation to independence and self-determination. Socialists cannot achieve their great aim without fighting against all oppression of nations, including the nations oppressed by them.

In regard to the nationalism of the oppressed nation which sometimes goes under the term "Black Consciousness" in South Africa, suffice to say that it will, like any other nationalism, pass through various phases, according to the classes that are dominant in the liberation movement at a given time. To uphold retrogressive nationalism in the name of liberation, a kind of

nationalism that breeds hostility between the workers of different nations or nationalities, at a time when their unity is in fact an immediate historical need of the revolution, can only be described as petty-bourgeois national opportunism. While revolutionaries must unconditionally support the nationalism of any oppressed nation that has a general democratic content and that is directed against oppression, Lenin insisted that, at the same time, they should strictly distinguish it from the tendency towards national exclusiveness. "To the workers the important thing is to distinguish the principles of the two trends," he wrote in *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*,

"Insofar as the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation fights the oppressor, (we) are always, in every case, and more strongly than anyone else, in favour, for we are the staunchest and most consistent enemies of oppression. But insofar as the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation stands for its own bourgeois nationalism, we stand against it. We fight against the privileges and violence of the oppressor nation, and do not in any way condone strivings for privileges on the part of the oppressed nation."⁷

While struggling against the retrogressive perversion of Black Consciousness, however, we must equally not allow our revolutionary perspective to be carried away and find ourselves losing sight of the nationalism of the oppressor nation, the nationalism of the Afrikaanse Weerstandsbeweging, the South African Ku Klux Klansmen. This was exactly one of the mistakes of Rosa Luxemburg, for which Lenin reprimanded her. Rosa Luxemburg argued that recognition of the right to self-determination is tantamount to supporting the bourgeois nationalism of the oppressed nations; but in her fear of the nationalism of the bourgeoisie of oppressed nations, Rosa Luxemburg was actually playing into the hands of the nationalism of the Russian oppressor nation.

The Meaning of the Right to Self-Determination In the South African Context

A more precise and concrete meaning of the concept of self-determination in the sphere of solving the national question in South Africa is necessary. What are the basic features of the demand for self-determination? How should we approach the question?

Basically, this principle implies the right to determine one's own destiny without dictation, compulsion or pressure by other nations or states; it means the right to determine one's fate in the various spheres of life and development.

But it is necessary to make some qualifications. In South Africa itself, our apartheid rulers have declared that by creating Bantustans for the African

ethnic groups, they are granting them their right to self-determination. Do the Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, etc. have, in fact, that right to determine their "political and economic status independently, and to solve their own problems, up to and including the formation of an independent state"?

In his writings on the national question Lenin insisted that an abstract presentation of the question is of no use at all. "Self-determination of nations, from a historico-economic point of view, cannot have any other meaning than political self-determination, state independence and the formation of a nation state."

Self-determination, the right to independent existence in the political sense, is inherently anti-colonial and includes the demand for independence from colonial rule and any other form of national oppression. It therefore incorporates the demand to dismantle the oppressor state power and to assert our independence by creating a new state of our choosing.

This conclusion follows logically from the understanding of the history of imperialism and its division of the world into colonies, and the subsequent national oppression and exploitation of peoples inhabiting those colonies. Anybody who does not understand this precise meaning, who still equates self-determination with (a) autonomy, (b) federation or (c) Bantustan secessions, has not yet grasped the attitude of Marxism-Leninism to the question of self-determination in South Africa.

The Merging of Nations Into A Single South African Nation

The solution of the national question in South Africa can only proceed from the integration of the two nations, under conditions of total equality, into a single South African nation. This fusion of nations, furthermore, can only proceed systematically if it is headed by the working class, the only class found in the two nations that objectively needs unity. We would like to illustrate this proposition by a quotation from a letter Lenin wrote to the Workers and Peasants of Ukraine on December 28, 1919:

"Capital is an international force. To vanquish it, an international workers' alliance, an international workers' brotherhood, is needed.

"We are opposed to national enmity and discord, to national exclusiveness. We are internationalists. We stand for the close union and the complete amalgamation of the workers and peasants of all nations in a single world Soviet republic...

"We want a *voluntary* union of nations — a union which precludes any coercion by another — a union founded on complete confidence, on a clear recognition of brotherly unity, on absolutely voluntary consent. Such a union cannot be effected at one stroke; we have to work towards it with the greatest patience and circumspection, so as not to spoil matters and not to arouse distrust, and so that the distrust inherited from centuries of landowner and capitalist oppression, centuries

of private property and the enmity caused by its divisions and redivisions may have a chance to wear off.

"We must, therefore, strive persistently for the unity of nations and ruthlessly suppress everything that tends to divide them, and in doing so we must be very cautious and patient, and make concessions to the survivals of national distrust. We must be adamant and uncompromising towards everything that affronts the fundamental interests of labour in its fight for emancipation from the yoke of capital... In this matter we can afford to wait, and must wait, because the national distrust among the broad mass of peasants and small owners is often extremely tenacious, and haste might only intensify it, in other words, jeopardise the cause of complete and ultimate unity..."

If the aim of our revolution is not only to end the inequality between the Black and White nations, between the African, Indian and Coloured nationalities, and the racial hostility that goes with that national inequality, but also to bring these nations and nationalities together into a single South African nation without any racial privileges, then to achieve this aim, it is necessary to organise the only class that is capable of achieving this kind of revolution — the working class of both Black and White nations in a struggle to achieve socialist solutions. It is impossible to abolish national oppression under capitalism, said Lenin, since this requires the abolition of classes, i.e. the introduction of socialism. He argued:

"By transforming capitalism into socialism the proletariat creates the possibility of abolishing national oppression; the possibility becomes reality 'only' — 'only!' — with the establishment of full democracy in all spheres, including the delineation of the state frontiers in accordance with the 'sympathies' of the population... And this, in turn, will serve as a basis for developing the practical elimination of even the slightest national friction and the least national mistrust, for an accelerated drawing together and fusion of nations..." (*The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-determination.*)

As our people, led by the working class, will liberate themselves from apartheid oppression they will gravitate irresistibly towards integration with their white countrymen, a process at present, though slowly, taking place now under the aegis of the African National Congress, the leader of this revolution. The degree of the smoothness of this process will depend largely on the class at the head of the revolution, and whether or not the former oppressors infringe the oppressed nation's feeling of self-respect. The Party of the working class, indicated Lenin, strives to draw nations closer together, and bring about their further fusion; but it desires to achieve this aim not by violence, but exclusively through a free fraternal unity of the workers and the working people of the nations.

