

V.I. LENIN

THE RIGHT OF NATIONS TO SELF-DETERMINATION



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TO
SELF-DETERMINATION



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Moscow 1950

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This translation of V. I. Lenin's *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination* has been made from the text given in the *Collected Works* of V. I. Lenin, Vol. XX, Fourth Russian Edition, prepared by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute (Gospolitizdat, Moscow 1948).

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
1. WHAT IS SELF-DETERMINATION OF NATIONS?	8
2. THE HISTORICALLY CONCRETE PRESENTATION OF THE QUESTION	17
3. THE CONCRETE SPECIFIC FEATURES OF THE NATIONAL QUESTION IN RUSSIA AND RUSSIA'S BOURGEOIS-DEMOCRATIC REFORMATION	23
4. "PRACTICALNESS" IN THE NATIONAL QUESTION	31
5. THE LIBERAL BOURGEOISIE AND THE SOCIALIST OPPORTUNISTS ON THE NATIONAL QUESTION	41
6. THE SECESSION OF NORWAY FROM SWEDEN	59
7. THE RESOLUTION OF THE LONDON INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS, 1896	69
8. KARL MARX THE UTOPIAN AND PRACTICAL ROSA LUXEMBURG	77
9. THE 1903 PROGRAM AND ITS LIQUIDATORS	90
10. CONCLUSION	105
NOTES	113

Point 9 of the program of the Russian Marxists, which deals with the right of nations to self-determination, has of late given rise (as we have already pointed out in *Prosveshcheniye*)¹ to a regular crusade of the opportunists. The Russian Liquidator² Semkovsky in the St. Petersburg Liquidatorist newspaper, the Bundist³ Liebman and the Ukrainian Social-Nationalist Yurkevich have sharply attacked this point in their respective journals and have treated it with an air of supreme contempt. There is no doubt that this "twelve languages invasion" of opportunism into our Marxian program is closely connected with present-day nationalistic vacillations in general. Hence a detailed analysis of this question seems to us timely. We shall only observe that none of the above-mentioned opportunists has adduced a single independent argument; all of them merely repeat what was said by Rosa Luxemburg in her long Polish article of 1908-09, "The National Question and Autonomy." In our exposition we shall deal mainly with the "original" arguments of this last-named author.

1. WHAT IS SELF-DETERMINATION OF NATIONS?

Naturally, this is the first question to arise when any attempt is made to examine in a Marxist way what is known as self-determination. What should be understood by that term? Should we seek for an answer in legal definitions deduced from all sorts of "general concepts" of law? Or should we seek an answer in the historical and economic study of the national movements?

It is not surprising that Messrs. the Semkovskys, Liebmans and Yurkeviches did not even think of raising this question, limiting themselves merely to sneering about the "obscurity" of the Marxist program, apparently not knowing in their simplicity that self-determination of nations is dealt with not only in the Russian program of 1903, but also in the resolution of the London International Congress of 1896 (with which I shall deal in detail in the proper place). Much more surprising is the fact that Rosa Luxemburg, who declaims a great deal about the alleged abstract

and metaphysical nature of the point in question should herself succumb to the sin of abstraction and metaphysics. It is Rosa Luxemburg herself who is continually straying into generalities about self-determination (including the very amusing disquisition on the question of how the will of the nation is to be ascertained), without anywhere clearly and precisely asking herself whether the crux of the issue lies in juridical definitions or in the experience of the national movements throughout the world.

A precise formulation of this question, which a Marxist cannot avoid, would at once have undermined nine-tenths of Rosa Luxemburg's arguments. This is not the first time national movements have arisen in Russia, nor are they peculiar to that country alone. Throughout the world, the period of the final victory of capitalism over feudalism has been linked up with national movements. The economic basis of these movements is the fact that in order to achieve complete victory for commodity production the bourgeoisie must capture the home market, must have politically united territories with a population speaking the same language, and all obstacles to the development of this language and to its consolidation in literature must be removed. Language is the most important means of human intercourse. Unity of language and its unimpeded development is one of the most important conditions for gen-

uinely free and extensive commercial intercourse on a scale commensurate with modern capitalism, for a free and broad grouping of the population in all its separate classes and, lastly, for the establishment of close connection between the market and each and every proprietor, big or little, seller and buyer.

Therefore, the tendency of every national movement is towards the formation of *national states*, under which these requirements of modern capitalism are best satisfied. The profoundest economic factors drive towards this goal, and therefore, for the whole of Western Europe, nay, for the entire civilized world, the *typical*, normal state for the capitalist period is the national state.

Consequently, if we want to grasp the meaning of self-determination of nations not by juggling with legal definitions, or “inventing” abstract definitions, but by examining the historical and economic conditions of the national movements, we shall inevitably reach the conclusion that self-determination of nations means the political separation of these nations from alien national bodies, the formation of an independent national state.

Later on, we shall see still other reasons why it would be incorrect to understand the right to self-determination to mean anything but the right to separate state existence. At present, we must deal with Rosa Luxemburg’s efforts to “dismiss” the unavoidable conclusion that the striving to

form a national state rests on deep economic foundations.

Rosa Luxemburg is quite familiar with Kautsky's pamphlet *Nationality and Internationality*. (Supplement to *Die Neue Zeit*, No. 1, 1907-08; Russian translation in the magazine *Nauchnaya Mysl*, Riga 1908.) She knows that Kautsky, after carefully analyzing the question of the national state in Chapter Four of that pamphlet, arrived at the conclusion that Otto Bauer "*underestimates* the force of the urge to create a national state" (p. 23). Rosa Luxemburg herself quotes the following words of Kautsky: "The national state is the form of state that is *most suitable* for present-day conditions" (i.e., capitalist, civilized, economically progressive conditions, as distinguished from medieval, precapitalist, etc.), "it is the form in which it can best fulfil its tasks" (i.e., the task of securing the freest, widest and speediest development of capitalism). To this we must add Kautsky's still more precise concluding remark: heterogeneous nation states (what are called nationality states as distinguished from national states) are "always states whose internal constitution has for some reason or other remained abnormal or underdeveloped" (backward). Needless to say, Kautsky speaks of abnormality exclusively in the sense of lack of conformity with what is best adapted to the requirements of developing capitalism.

The question now is, how did Rosa Luxemburg treat these historical-economic conclusions of Kautsky's? Are they right or wrong? Is Kautsky right in his historical-economic theory, or is Bauer, whose theory is psychological at bottom? What is the connection between Bauer's undoubted "national opportunism," his defence of cultural-national autonomy, his nationalistic infatuation ("here and there an emphasis on the national aspect," as Kautsky put it), his "enormous exaggeration of the national aspect and complete oblivion to the international aspect" (Kautsky)—and his underestimation of the force of the urge to create a national state?

Rosa Luxemburg did not even raise this question. She failed to notice this connection. She did not weigh the *totality* of Bauer's theoretical views. She did not even draw a contrast between the historical-economic and the psychological theory of the national question. She confined herself to the following remarks in criticism of Kautsky:

"This 'best' national state is only an abstraction, which can easily be developed and defended theoretically, but which does not correspond to reality." (*Przegląd Socjaldemokratyczny*,* 1908, No. 6, p. 499.)

And in corroboration of this bold statement there follow arguments to the effect that the "right to self-determination" of small nations is

* *Social-Democratic Review*.—Tr.

rendered illusory by the development of the great capitalist powers and by imperialism. "Can one seriously speak," exclaims Rosa Luxemburg, "about the 'self-determination' of the formally independent Montenegrins, Bulgarians, Rumanians, Serbs, Greeks, partly even the Swiss, whose independence is itself a result of the political struggle and the diplomatic game of the 'concert of Europe'?"! (P. 500.) The state that best suits the conditions is "not a national state, as Kautsky believes, but a predatory state." Several dozen figures are quoted relating to the size of British, French and other colonial possessions.

Reading such arguments one cannot help marvelling how the author contrived not to understand *what's what*! To teach Kautsky with a serious mien that small states are economically dependent on big ones, that a struggle is going on between the bourgeois states for the predatory suppression of other nations, that imperialism and colonies exist—savours of ridiculously childish attempts to be clever, for all this has not the slightest bearing on the subject. Not only small states, but even Russia, for example, is economically entirely dependent on the power of the imperialist finance capital of the "rich" bourgeois countries. Not only the miniature Balkan states, but even America in the nineteenth century was economically a colony of Europe, as Marx pointed out in *Capital*.⁴ Kautsky, and every Marxist, is well

aware of this, of course, but as regards the question of national movements and the national state this is neither here nor there.

For the question of the political self-determination of nations in bourgeois society, and of their independence as states, Rosa Luxemburg has substituted the question of their economic independence. This is as intelligent as if someone, in discussing the demand in the program for the supremacy of parliament, i.e., the assembly of people's representatives, in a bourgeois state, were to expound the perfectly correct conviction that big capital dominates no matter what the regime in a bourgeois country.

There is no doubt that the greater part of Asia, the most populous continent, consists either of colonies of the "Great Powers," or of states which are extremely dependent and oppressed as nations. But does this commonly-known circumstance in any way shake the undoubted fact that in Asia itself the conditions for the most complete development of commodity production, for the freest, widest and speediest growth of capitalism, have been created only in Japan, i.e., only in an independent national state? This state is a bourgeois state, therefore, it, itself, has begun to oppress other nations and to enslave colonies. We cannot say whether Asia will have time before the downfall of capitalism to become crystallized into a system of independent national states, like Europe; but it

remains an undisputed fact that capitalism, having awakened Asia, has called forth national movements everywhere in that continent, too; that the tendency of these movements is towards the creation of national states in Asia; that the best conditions for the development of capitalism are ensured precisely by such states. The example of Asia speaks *in favour* of Kautsky and *against* Rosa Luxemburg.

The example of the Balkan states likewise speaks against her, for everyone can see now that the best conditions for the development of capitalism in the Balkans are created precisely in proportion to the creation of independent national states in that peninsula.

Therefore, Rosa Luxemburg notwithstanding, the example of the whole of progressive, civilized mankind, the example of the Balkans and the example of Asia prove that Kautsky's proposition is absolutely correct: the national state is the rule and the "norm" of capitalism; the heterogeneous nation state represents backwardness, or is an exception. From the standpoint of national relations, the best conditions for the development of capitalism are undoubtedly provided by the national state. This does not mean, of course, that such a state, based on bourgeois relations, could eliminate the exploitation and oppression of nations. It only means that Marxists cannot lose sight of the powerful *economic* factors that give rise to the striv-

ing to create national states. It means that “self-determination of nations” in the program of the Marxists *cannot*, from a historical-economic point of view, have any other meaning than political self-determination, political independence, the formation of a national state.

On what conditions the bourgeois-democratic demand for a “national state” is to be supported from a Marxian, i.e., class proletarian, point of view will be dealt with in detail later on. At present we confine ourselves to the definition of the *concept* “self-determination” and must only note that Rosa Luxemburg *knows* what this concept means (“national state”), whereas her opportunist partisans, the Liebmanns, the Semkovskys, the Yurkeviches *do not even know that!*