



**LENIN
ON THE NATIONAL
AND
COLONIAL QUESTIONS**

Three Articles

**LENIN ON
THE NATIONAL AND
COLONIAL QUESTIONS**

Three Articles

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS
PEKING 1970

列宁论民族殖民地问题的三篇文章

*

外文出版社出版（北京）

1967年（32开）第一版

1970年第二次印刷

编号：（英）1050—527

00025

1/1—E—794P

First Edition 1967
Second Printing 1970

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a collection of three articles by V. I. Lenin on the national and colonial questions. "The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination (Theses)" has been reprinted from V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, International Publishers, New York, 1942, Vol. XIX, and "Preliminary Draft of Theses on the National and Colonial Questions" from V. I. Lenin, *Selected Works*, English edition, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1952, Vol. II, Part 2. "The Report of the Commission on the National and Colonial Questions" has been translated from the Russian original in V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 4th Russian edition, Gospolitizdat, Moscow, 1950, Vol. XXXI.

The notes at the end of the book are mainly based on those given in the Chinese edition published under the same title by the People's Publishing House, Peking, in August 1964. A few notes from the English editions mentioned above have also been used.

Printed in the People's Republic of China

CONTENTS

THE SOCIALIST REVOLUTION AND THE RIGHT OF NATIONS TO SELF-DETERMINATION (THESES)	1
1. Imperialism, Socialism and the Liberation of Oppressed Nations	1
2. The Socialist Revolution and the Struggle for Democracy	2
3. The Meaning of the Right to Self-Determination and Its Relation to Federation	5
4. The Proletarian-Revolutionary Presentation of the Question of the Self-Determination of Nations	7
5. Marxism and Proudhonism on the National Question	9
6. Three Types of Countries in Relation to Self-Determination of Nations	11
7. Social-Chauvinism and Self-Determination of Nations	13
8. The Concrete Tasks of the Proletariat in the Immediate Future	14
9. The Attitude of Russian and Polish Social-Democracy and of the Second International to Self-Determination	16
PRELIMINARY DRAFT OF THESES ON THE NATIONAL AND COLONIAL QUESTIONS (FOR THE SECOND CONGRESS OF THE COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL)	20
THE REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON THE NATIONAL AND COLONIAL QUESTIONS (July 26, 1920)	30
NOTES	38

THE SOCIALIST REVOLUTION AND THE RIGHT OF NATIONS TO SELF-DETERMINATION (THESES)

1. IMPERIALISM, SOCIALISM AND THE LIBERATION OF OPPRESSED NATIONS

Imperialism is the highest stage of development of capitalism. Capital in the advanced countries has outgrown the boundaries of national states. It has established monopoly in place of competition, thus creating all the objective prerequisites for the achievement of socialism. Hence, in Western Europe and in the United States of America, the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat for the overthrow of the capitalist governments, for the expropriation of the bourgeoisie, is on the order of the day. Imperialism is forcing the masses into this struggle by sharpening class antagonisms to an immense degree, by worsening the conditions of the masses both economically — trusts and high cost of living, and politically — growth of militarism, frequent wars, increase of reac-

tion, strengthening and extension of national oppression and colonial plunder. Victorious socialism must achieve complete democracy and, consequently, not only bring about the complete equality of nations, but also give effect to the right of oppressed nations to self-determination, *i.e.*, the right to free political secession. Socialist Parties which fail to prove by all their activities now, as well as during the revolution and after its victory, that they will free the enslaved nations and establish relations with them on the basis of a free union — and a free union is a lying phrase without right to secession — such parties would be committing treachery to socialism.

Of course, democracy is also a form of state which must disappear when the state disappears, but this will take place only in the process of transition from completely victorious and consolidated socialism to complete communism.

2. THE SOCIALIST REVOLUTION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY

The socialist revolution is not one single act, not one single battle on a single front, but a whole epoch of intensified class conflicts, a long series of battles on all fronts, *i.e.*, battles around all the problems of economics and politics, which can culminate only in the expropriation of the bourgeoisie. It would be a fundamental mistake to suppose that the struggle for democracy can divert the proletariat from the socialist revolution, or obscure, or overshadow it, etc. On the contrary, just as socialism cannot be victorious unless it introduces complete democracy, so the proletariat will be unable to prepare for victory over the bourgeoisie unless it wages a many-sided, consistent and revolutionary struggle for democracy.

It would be no less mistaken to delete any of the points of the democratic programme, for example, the point of self-determination of nations, on the ground that it is "infeasible," or that it is "illusory" under imperialism. The assertion that the right of nations to self-determination cannot be achieved within the framework of capitalism may be understood either in its absolute, economic sense, or in the conventional, political sense.

In the first case, the assertion is fundamentally wrong in theory. First, in this sense, it is impossible to achieve such things as labour money, or the abolition of crises, etc., under capitalism. But it is entirely incorrect to argue that the self-determination of nations is *likewise* infeasible. Secondly, even the one example of the secession of Norway from Sweden in 1905 is sufficient to refute the argument that it is "infeasible" in this sense. Thirdly, it would be ridiculous to deny that, with a slight change in political and strategical relationships, for example, between Germany and England, the formation of new states, Polish, Indian, etc., would be quite "feasible" very soon. Fourthly, finance capital, in its striving towards expansion, will "freely" buy and bribe the freest, most democratic and republican government and the elected officials of any country, however "independent" it may be. The domination of finance capital, as of capital in general, cannot be abolished by *any* kind of reforms in the realm of political democracy, and self-determination belongs wholly and exclusively to this realm. The domination of finance capital, however, does not in the least destroy the significance of political democracy as the freer, wider and more distinct *form* of class oppression and class struggle. Hence, all argu-

ments about the "impossibility of achieving" economically one of the demands of political democracy under capitalism reduce themselves to a theoretically incorrect definition of the general and fundamental relations of capitalism and of political democracy in general.

In the second case, this assertion is incomplete and inaccurate, for not only the right of nations to self-determination, but *all* the fundamental demands of political democracy are "possible of achievement" under imperialism, only in an incomplete, in a mutilated form and as a rare exception (for example, the secession of Norway from Sweden in 1905). The demand for the immediate liberation of the colonies, as advanced by all revolutionary Social-Democrats, is also "impossible of achievement" under capitalism without a series of revolutions. This does not imply, however, that Social-Democracy must refrain from conducting an immediate and most determined struggle for *all* these demands—to refrain would merely be to the advantage of the bourgeoisie and reaction. On the contrary, it implies that it is necessary to formulate and put forward all these demands, not in a reformist, but in a revolutionary way; not by keeping within the framework of bourgeois legality, but by breaking through it; not by confining oneself to parliamentary speeches and verbal protests, but by drawing the masses into real action, by widening and fomenting the struggle for every kind of fundamental, democratic demand, right up to and including the direct onslaught of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, *i.e.*, to the socialist revolution, which will expropriate the bourgeoisie. The socialist revolution may break out not only in consequence of a great strike, a street demonstration, a hunger riot, a mutiny in the forces, or a colonial rebellion, but also in

consequence of any political crisis, like the Dreyfus affair,¹ the Zabern incident,² or in connection with a referendum on the secession of an oppressed nation, etc.

The intensification of national oppression under imperialism makes it necessary for Social-Democracy not to renounce what the bourgeoisie describes as the "utopian" struggle for the freedom of nations to secede, but, on the contrary, to take more advantage than ever before of conflicts arising *also* on this ground for the purpose of rousing mass action and revolutionary attacks upon the bourgeoisie.

3. THE MEANING OF THE RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION AND ITS RELATION TO FEDERATION

The right of nations to self-determination means only the right to independence in a political sense, the right to free, political secession from the oppressing nation. Concretely, this political, democratic demand implies complete freedom to carry on agitation in favour of secession, and freedom to settle the question of secession by means of a referendum of the nation that desires to secede. Consequently, this demand is by no means identical with the demand for secession, for partition, for the formation of small states. It is merely the logical expression of the struggle against national oppression in every form. The more closely the democratic system of state approximates to complete freedom of secession, the rarer and weaker will the striving for secession be in practice; for the advantages of large states, both from the point of view

of economic progress and from the point of view of the interests of the masses, are beyond doubt, and these advantages increase with the growth of capitalism. The recognition of self-determination is not the same as making federation a principle. One may be a determined opponent of this principle and a partisan of democratic centralism and yet prefer federation to national inequality as the only path towards complete democratic centralism. It was precisely from this point of view that Marx, although a centralist, preferred even the federation of Ireland with England to the forcible subjection of Ireland to the English.³

The aim of socialism is not only to abolish the present division of mankind into small states and all national isolation; not only to bring the nations closer to each other, but also to merge them. And in order to achieve this aim, we must, on the one hand, explain to the masses the reactionary nature of the ideas of Renner and Otto Bauer concerning so-called "cultural national autonomy"⁴ and, on the other hand, demand the liberation of the oppressed nations, not only in general, nebulous phrases, not in empty declamations, not by "postponing" the question until socialism is established, but in a clearly and precisely formulated political programme which shall particularly take into account the hypocrisy and cowardice of the Socialists in the oppressing nations. Just as mankind can achieve the abolition of classes only by passing through the transition period of the dictatorship of the oppressed class, so mankind can achieve the inevitable merging of nations only by passing through the transition period of complete liberation of all the oppressed nations, *i.e.*, their freedom to secede.

4. THE PROLETARIAN-REVOLUTIONARY PRESENTATION OF THE QUESTION OF THE SELF-DETERMINATION OF NATIONS

Not only the demand for the self-determination of nations but *all* the items of our democratic minimum programme were advanced *before us*, as far back as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, by the petty bourgeoisie. And the petty bourgeoisie, believing in "peaceful" capitalism, continues to this day to advance *all* these demands in a utopian way, without seeing the class struggle and the fact that it has become intensified under democracy. The idea of a peaceful union of equal nations under imperialism, which deceives the people, and which the Kautskyists advocate, is precisely of this nature. As against this philistine, opportunist utopia, the programme of Social-Democracy must point out that under imperialism the division of nations into oppressing and oppressed ones is a fundamental, most important and inevitable fact.

The proletariat of the oppressing nations cannot confine itself to the general hackneyed phrases against annexations and for the equal rights of nations in general, that may be repeated by any pacifist bourgeois. The proletariat cannot evade the question that is particularly "unpleasant" for the imperialist bourgeoisie, namely, the question of the *frontiers* of a state that is based on national oppression. The proletariat cannot but fight against the forcible retention of the oppressed nations within the boundaries of a given state, and this is exactly what the struggle for the right of self-determination means. The proletariat must demand the right of political secession for the colonies and for the nations that "its

own" nation oppresses. Unless it does this, proletarian internationalism will remain a meaningless phrase; mutual confidence and class solidarity between the workers of the oppressing and oppressed nations will be impossible; the hypocrisy of the reformist and Kautskyan advocates of self-determination who maintain silence about the nations which are oppressed by "their" nation and forcibly retained within "their" state will remain unexposed.

The Socialists of the oppressed nations, on the other hand, must particularly fight for and maintain complete, absolute unity (also organizational) between the workers of the oppressed nation and the workers of the oppressing nation. Without such unity it will be impossible to maintain an independent proletarian policy and class solidarity with the proletariat of other countries in the face of all the subterfuge, treachery and trickery of the bourgeoisie; for the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nations always converts the slogan of national liberation into a means for deceiving the workers; in internal politics it utilizes these slogans as a means for concluding reactionary agreements with the bourgeoisie of the ruling nation (for instance, the Poles in Austria and Russia, who entered into pacts with reaction in order to oppress the Jews and the Ukrainians); in the realm of foreign politics it strives to enter into pacts with one of the rival imperialist powers for the purpose of achieving its own predatory aims (the policies of the small states in the Balkans, etc.).

The fact that the struggle for national liberation against one imperialist power may, under certain circumstances, be utilized by another "Great" Power in its equally imperialist interests should have no more weight in inducing Social-Democracy to renounce its recognition of the right of nations to self-determination than the numerous cases of the bour-

geoisie utilizing republican slogans for the purpose of political deception and financial robbery, for example, in the Latin countries, have had in inducing them to renounce republicanism.*

5. MARXISM AND PROUDHONISM ON THE NATIONAL QUESTION

In contrast to the petty-bourgeois democrats, Marx regarded all democratic demands without exception not as an absolute, but as a historical expression of the struggle of the masses of the people, led by the bourgeoisie, against feudalism. There is not a single democratic demand which could not serve, and has not served, under certain conditions, as an instrument of the bourgeoisie for deceiving the workers. To single out one of the demands of political democracy, namely, the self-determination of nations, and to oppose it to all the rest, is fundamentally wrong in theory. In practice, the proletariat will be able to retain its independence only if it subordinates its struggle for all the democratic demands, not excluding the

* Needless to say, to repudiate the right of self-determination on the ground that logically it means "defence of the fatherland" would be quite ridiculous. With equal logic, *i.e.*, with equal shallowness, the social-chauvinists of 1914-16 apply this argument to every one of the demands of democracy (for instance, to republicanism), and to every formulation of the struggle against national oppression, in order to justify "defence of the fatherland." Marxism arrives at the recognition of defence of the fatherland, for example, in the wars of the Great French Revolution and the Garibaldi wars⁵ in Europe, and at the repudiation of defence of the fatherland in the imperialist war of 1914-16, from the analysis of the specific historical circumstances of each separate war, and not from some "general principle," or some separate item of a programme.

demand for a republic, to its revolutionary struggle for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie.

On the other hand, in contrast to the Proudhonists, who "repudiated" the national problem "in the name of the social revolution," Marx, having in mind mainly the interests of the proletarian class struggle in the advanced countries, put into the forefront the fundamental principle of internationalism and socialism, *viz.*, that no nation can be free if it oppresses other nations.⁶ It was precisely from the standpoint of the interests of the revolutionary movement of the German workers that Marx in 1848 demanded that victorious democracy in Germany should proclaim and grant freedom to the nations that the Germans were oppressing.⁷ It was precisely from the standpoint of the revolutionary struggle of the English workers that Marx in 1869 demanded the separation of Ireland from England, and added: "... although after the separation there may come federation."⁸ Only by putting forward this demand did Marx really educate the English workers in the spirit of internationalism. Only in this way was he able to oppose the revolutionary solution of a given historical problem to the opportunists and bourgeois reformism, which even now, half a century later, has failed to achieve the Irish "reform." Only in this way was Marx able — unlike the apologists of capital who shout about the right of small nations to secession being utopian and impossible, and about the progressive nature not only of economic but also of political concentration — to urge the progressive nature of this concentration in a *non-imperialist* manner, to urge the bringing together of the nations, not by force, but on the basis of a free union of the proletarians of all countries. Only in this way was Marx able, *also* in the sphere of the solution of na-

tional problems, to oppose the revolutionary action of the masses to verbal and often hypocritical recognition of the equality and the self-determination of nations. The imperialist war of 1914-16 and the Augean stables⁹ of hypocrisy of the opportunists and Kautskyists it exposed have strikingly confirmed the correctness of Marx's policy, which must serve as the model for all the advanced countries; for all of them now oppress other nations.*

6. THREE TYPES OF COUNTRIES IN RELATION TO SELF-DETERMINATION OF NATIONS

In this respect, countries must be divided into three main types:

First, the advanced capitalist countries of Western Europe and the United States of America. In these countries the bourgeois, progressive, national movements came to an end long ago. Every one of these "great" nations oppresses other nations in the colonies and within its own country. The tasks of the proletariat of these ruling nations are the same

* Reference is often made — recently, for instance, by the German chauvinist Lensch, in *Die Glocke*,¹⁰ Nos. 8-9 — to the fact that Marx's adverse attitude to the national movement of certain peoples, for example, the Czechs in 1848, refutes the necessity of recognizing the self-determination of nations from the point of view of Marxism. This is incorrect, for in 1848 there were historical and political grounds for drawing a distinction between "reactionary" and revolutionary democratic nations. Marx was right when he condemned the former and defended the latter.¹¹ The right to self-determination is one of the demands of democracy which must naturally be subordinated to the general interests of democracy. In 1848 and subsequent years, those general interests were concentrated primarily in the struggle against tsarism.

as those of the proletariat in England in the nineteenth century in relation to Ireland.*

Secondly, Eastern Europe: Austria, the Balkans and particularly Russia. Here it was the twentieth century that particularly developed the bourgeois-democratic national movements and intensified the national struggle. The tasks of the proletariat in these countries — in regard to the consummation of their bourgeois-democratic reformation, as well as in regard to assisting the socialist revolution in other countries — cannot be achieved unless it champions the right of nations to self-determination. In this connection the most difficult but most important task is to merge the class struggle of the workers in the oppressing nations with the class struggle of the workers in the oppressed nations.

Thirdly, the semi-colonial countries, like China, Persia, Turkey, and all the colonies, which have a combined population amounting to a billion. In these countries the bourgeois-democratic movements have either hardly begun, or are far

* In some small states which have remained out of the war of 1914-16 — for example, Holland and Switzerland — the bourgeoisie strongly urges the slogan “self-determination of nations” to justify participation in the imperialist war. This is one of the motives that induces the Social-Democrats in such countries to repudiate self-determination. In this case the correct proletarian policy, namely, the repudiation of “defence of the fatherland” in an *imperialist* war is defended by wrong arguments. What results is a distortion of Marxian theory, while in practice we have a peculiar small-nation narrow-mindedness, which forgets about the *hundreds of millions* of the population of nations that are enslaved by the “Great Power” nations. Comrade Horter, in his excellent pamphlet *Imperialism, the War and Social-Democracy*, wrongly rejects the principle of self-determination of nations, but correctly *applies* it when he demands the *immediate* granting of “political and *national* independence” to the Dutch Indies and exposes the Dutch opportunists who refuse to put forward this demand and to fight for it.