

Lenin on the National Liberation Struggle

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Today it is taken for granted that the great awakening of the people of the Third World is one of the significant events of our time. It is increasingly being understood, too, that the fate of the West is tied up with this historic shake-up. Already, at the beginning of the twentieth century Lenin, on the basis of the work of Marx and Engels and arising out of the experience of the 1905 revolution, was able to foresee the new shape of the world revolution.

The twentieth century ushered in a new epoch, that of imperialism and the eve of socialist revolution; but this revolution, by its very character, was destined to be linked to the national liberation movement on which it had an immense influence. As early as 1853, Marx, with brilliant prevision, had posed the question: "Can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia?" (*New York Daily Tribune*, "British Rule in India", June 25, 1853). With the same thought in mind he wrote, in that same year, that "the next uprising of the people of Europe" may depend more "on what is now passing" in China "than on any other political cause that now exists". (*New York Daily Tribune*, June 14, 1853). Less than five years later, in a letter to Engels commenting on the great Indian revolt of that time, Marx declared that "India is now our best ally" (January 1858). Similarly Engels, in his turn, in a letter to Kautsky (September 12, 1882), made the significant remark that "India will perhaps, indeed very probably, make a revolution . . . The same might also take place elsewhere, e.g. in Algeria and Egypt, and would certainly be the best thing for us."

Marx and Engels on National Liberation

In these pronouncements Marx and Engels showed how well they comprehended the relation between the anti-colonial national liberation struggle and the fight for socialism in the metropolitan countries. "India is our best ally". Revolutions in India, Algeria and Egypt—"the best thing for us."

The next uprising in Europe likely to depend on "what is now passing in" China. These ideas, of the common nature of the struggle, were developed further by Marx and Engels in relation to Ireland, in connection with which Marx penned the resolu-

tion of the First International containing the historic words: "A people which enslaves another forges its own chains".

Thus, in their writings and activities, Marx and Engels increasingly drew attention to the great importance of the national liberation movement for the British people. They saw that the roots of British capitalism, of British political reaction, lay in the colonial system. The expansion of capitalism, the drawing of India, China and other territories into the capitalist sphere—a process that was to be carried still further in the twentieth century with the development of imperialism—had two epoch-making results.

First, the destruction of the former society in those territories, with the consequent impoverishment of the peoples there.

Secondly, the birth of new class forces in those countries, and the eventual gathering of the "chronic rebellions" into one "formidable revolution" (as Marx commented in relation to China, *New York Daily Tribune*, June 14, 1853), the effects of which would not be confined to the frontiers of the oppressed countries but would react back decisively on the imperialist metropolis itself.

With Russia becoming the vanguard of the world revolution at the end of the nineteenth century (as Marx and Engels had already noted in their 1882 Preface to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*), it was the socialist movement in Russia that was to become the catalyst of the national liberation movement, especially in Asia.

Marx and Engels did not live to see this happen. Nor, brilliant revolutionaries though they were, could they foresee all the effects which were to flow from this development. It was left to Lenin and the Bolsheviks to carry forward these ideas, both in theory and in practice.

Significance of 1905

In 1902 (*What is to be Done?*) Lenin pointed out that history had confronted the Russian working class with the task of destroying not only the main base of reaction in Europe but of Asiatic reaction as well. That this was to be the case was shown already by the 1905 revolution. Defeated though it

was, it spurred on the democratic revolution in Persia, Turkey, India, China and the "Dutch" East Indies.¹

"These two mighty streams of the revolutionary movement among the proletarian masses of Russia and the peasant masses of the East were undoubtedly the factors which lay at the basis of the brilliant theory of Lenin about the necessity for the creation of a united front of the industrial proletariat of the advanced industrial states with the enslaved masses of the colonial and semi-colonial countries for the struggle against capitalism".²

In the years prior to the first world war Lenin repeatedly stressed the significance of 1905 and the awakening of Asia. Writing on the Chinese revolution he drew attention to the fact that "Four hundred million backward Asians have attained freedom and have awakened to political life. *One-fourth* of the world's population has passed, so to say, from slumber to enlightenment, movement and struggle".³ And yet, as Lenin noted, "progressive and civilised Europe", the Europe of the "imperialist bourgeoisie", showed no interest in this historic awakening. Throughout 1913 Lenin hammered away at the great significance of this revolutionary wave in Asia, this "era of storms" as he called it.

"Whatever may be the fate of the great Chinese Republic—against which the various 'civilised' hyenas are now gnashing their teeth—no power on earth can restore the old serfdom in Asia, or wipe out the heroic democracy of the popular masses in the Asian and semi-Asian countries".⁴

Writing in *Pravda*, on May 7, 1913, Lenin characterised the significance of 1905 in relation to Asia in this way:

"World capitalism and the 1905 movement in Russia have finally awakened Asia. Hundreds of millions of the downtrodden and benighted have awakened from medieval stagnation to a new life and are rising to fight for elementary human rights and democracy. The workers of the advanced countries follow with interest and inspiration this powerful growth of the liberation movement, in all its various forms, in every part of the world. The bourgeoisie of Europe, fearing the might of the labour movement, is looking for assistance from the forces of reaction, militarism, clericalism and obscurantism. But the proletariat of the European countries and the young democracy of Asia, fully confident of its strength and with abiding faith in

the masses, are advancing to take the place of this decadent and moribund bourgeoisie. *The awakening of Asia and the beginning of the struggle for power by the advanced proletariat of Europe are a symbol of a new phase in world history that began early this century*".⁵ (Own italics: J.W.)

Confidently Lenin declared: ". . . all young Asia, that is, the hundreds of millions of toilers in Asia, have a reliable ally in the proletariat of the civilised countries. No force on earth can prevent its victory, which will liberate both the peoples of Europe and the peoples of Asia".⁶

Lenin returned to this theme again in his Address to the Second All-Russian Congress of Communist Organisations of the Peoples of the East, on November 22, 1919, when he referred to the role of the 1905 revolution and its impact on the peoples of the East who were rising "as independent actors", as "builders of a new life", whereas previously they had been "objects of international imperialist policy, and which for capitalist culture and civilisation existed only as manure".

Lenin's words in 1913 sum up his all-round appreciation of the significance of the movement of the oppressed peoples. He recognised first that it was objective conditions, the development of "world capitalism", which had helped to awaken Asia, for it had weakened the fabric of the old society and, at the same time given birth to new modern classes—workers, capitalists and a new intelligentsia—classes which were able to organise modern, national mass movements. Secondly, the example of the Russian workers and peasants in 1905 had inspired and encouraged the millions of Asia who were laying aside their former passivity. Thirdly, the key to the future advance of socialism lay in the unity of the "advanced proletariat of Europe" and the "liberation movement, in all its various forms, in every part of the world".

So important did Lenin regard this development that he termed it "a symbol of a new phase in world history that began early this century". If he could already detect this in the aftermath of 1905 it can readily be appreciated how true his summation was after the October Revolution of 1917. The struggle of 1905 had given an impulse to the people's struggle in Asia; but the *defeat* of 1905 in Russia provided an opportunity for a counter-offensive by world imperialism. The peoples of Asia now found themselves under attack both from the flank by the Western powers as well as from the rear by tsarist Russia. The new Persia was attacked by Russia and Britain and partitioned into spheres of influence; the Balkan states were armed by Britain, Russia

¹ For details see "The October Revolution and the National Liberation Struggle" by Jack Woddis, *Marxism Today*, January 1968.

² Pavlovitch, M. *The Revolution of 1905 and the East*, Moscow, 1925.

³ "Regenerated China": *Pravda*, November 8, 1912.

⁴ *The Historical Destiny of the Doctrine of Karl Marx*, *Pravda*, March 1, 1913.

⁵ "The Awakening of Asia", *Pravda*, May 7, 1913. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 19, pp. 65-66.

⁶ "Backward Europe and Advanced Asia", *Pravda*, May 18, 1913. *Collected Works*, Vol. 19, pp. 77-78.

and France, and hurled against Turkey to prevent her rebirth; and the victory of Sun Yat-sen and the Chinese Republic in 1911 was followed a few months later by the *coup d'etat* of Yuan Shih-kai, backed by United States imperialism.

A New Phase

The victory of the Russian workers in 1917, however, opened a new phase of offensive by the national liberation movements. 1905 had been a "dress rehearsal" not only for the Russian workers; it had been no less so for the national liberation movements, whose struggles underwent a profound change after 1917. The October Revolution, wrote Ho Chi Minh,

"has shattered the fetters of imperialism, destroyed its foundation and inflicted on it a deadly blow. Like a thunderbolt, it has stirred up the Asian peoples from their centuries-old slumbers. It has opened up for them the revolutionary anti-imperialist era, the era of national liberation".⁷

There were a number of reasons why the Russian October Revolution had such an impact on the national liberation movement. In 1914 the big imperialist powers dominated the whole world. In 1917, as a result of the October Revolution, they lost one sixth of the earth's surface and ten per cent of its population. This meant an immense weakening of world imperialism, especially as it had relied on tsarist Russia to act as its gendarme and ally in the East.

The October Revolution ushered in a new epoch, the epoch of the transition to socialism. Capitalism, as a system of society, had received a deadly blow. The ability of the Russian workers and peasants to overthrow their landlords and factory owners could not but inspire and encourage millions throughout the world to advance their own struggle against their oppressors, domestic and foreign. Socialism, as the future form of world society, began to have an immense attraction for the colonial and semi-colonial peoples who constituted the majority of the world's population.

But it was above all the practice of the young Soviet state which counted most—and here Lenin's leadership was decisive. In December 1914 he had written:⁸

"... the proletarian revolution requires the prolonged education of the workers in the spirit of the *completest* national equality and fraternity. Hence, the interests of the Great-Russian proletariat itself require that the masses be systematically educated to champion—most resolutely, consistently, boldly

and in a revolutionary manner—complete equality and the right to self-determination for all the nations oppressed by Great Russians . . . Our model will always be Marx who, having lived in England for decades, became half English and demanded freedom and national independence for Ireland in the interests of the socialist movement of the English workers".

Under Lenin's guidance the Soviet Government acted fully in the spirit of that approach, and took immediate steps to ensure national rights for the formerly oppressed nationalities within its boundaries. The non-Russian peoples, both those in Europe and the millions of Moslems who had fought alongside their Russian brothers in the revolution and in the conflict against the imperialist armies of intervention, were helped to fulfil their national aspirations.

The Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia, adopted in the first days of the Revolution, on November 16th, 1917, called for the emancipation of the peoples of the former tsarist empire and "for a policy of voluntary and honest union of the peoples". It stipulated that the Soviet state was guided by the following principles: "1. Equality and sovereignty of all the peoples of Russia. 2. The right of the peoples of Russia to free self-determination, including secession and the formation of an independent state. 3. The repeal of all national and national-religious privileges and restrictions. 4. Free development of the national minorities and ethnographic groups inhabiting Russia".

"Free and Inviolable"

Acting in the spirit of these aims, Lenin, as Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, and Stalin, as People's Commissar for Nationalities Affairs, issued their historic Message to all the Working Moslems of Russia and of the East (December 3, 1917), in the course of which they declared:

"Moslems of Russia, Tartars of the Volga Country and the Crimea, Kirghizes and Sarts of Siberia and Turkestan, Turks and Tartars of the Transcaucasus, Chechens and Highlanders of the Caucasus, all those whose mosques and temples have been destroyed, whose faith and customs have been trampled by the tsars and oppressors of Russia!

"From now on your faiths and customs, your national and cultural institutions are declared free and inviolable. Arrange your national life freely and without hindrance. You have the right to this. Know that your rights, like those of all the other peoples of Russia, are protected by the might of the Revolution and its organs—the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies".⁹

⁷ Ho Chi Minh: *Selected Works*, Vol. 4, Hanoi, 1962: p. 147.

⁸ Lenin: *Sotsial-Demokrat*, No. 35, December 12, 1914, *Collected Works*, Vol. 21, pp. 84-88.

⁹ See *Milestones of Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1967*, Moscow 1967, pp. 33-35.

The act of liberating the formerly oppressed nations from their "prison-house" had a profound effect on the peoples throughout the colonial and semi-colonial world. The Soviet state recognised the independence of Finland (December 1917) and Poland (August 1918). The Soviet Decree on Peace, November 8, 1917, was a tocsin to peoples suffering under foreign domination. Its call for "an immediate peace without annexations (i.e., without the seizure of foreign lands, without the forcible incorporation of foreign nations) and without indemnities" became a powerful rallying cry for all opponents of imperialist aggression and territorial aggrandisement.

From the very beginning, too, the young socialist state encouraged the colonial peoples of the world to throw off foreign domination. The above cited appeal to Working Moslems called on the "Moslems of the East, Persians, Turks, Arabs and Indians, all those whose bodies, property, freedom and country had been commodities in the hands of the grasping vultures of Europe" to throw off "the enslavers".

"Do not lose any time. Shake off the age-old invaders of your countries! Do not let them pillage your wasted countries any longer! You must be the masters of your country! You must organise your life in your own mode and manner! You have the right to do this, for your destiny lies in your hands".

But Lenin and the Bolsheviks did more than appeal. They took a whole series of steps to assist and co-operate with neighbouring countries striving to throw off foreign rule. The Soviet state was beset with many difficulties. Its economy was in ruins as a result of the first world war. It was facing hostility and every form of sabotage and resistance from the dispossessed classes. It was compelled to fight for two years against the armies of fourteen capitalist states which seized vast areas of Soviet land. Yet, despite all this, and lacking resources as she did, the young socialist country held out its helping hand to its struggling neighbours.

Independence Recognised

Thus, it was the first to recognise the independence of Afghanistan in 1919, of Turkey in 1920, and of Mongolia in 1921. It concluded treaties based on equality and respect for mutual interests with Persia (February 26, 1921), with Afghanistan (February 28, 1921), and with Turkey (March 16, 1921); and openly renounced the concessions which the tsarist government had forced from other states, as in the case of Persia and China.

Though itself faced by grave economic problems and hostile imperialist powers, it gave direct aid to peoples engaged in military struggles against domes-

tic and foreign reaction, sending military advisers to assist Dr. Sun Yat-sen in China, and Kemal Ataturk in Turkey, as well as troops to assist the people of Mongolia in their struggle against foreign imperialism. The Soviet publication of the tsarist government's secret treaties, and especially the Sykes-Picot documents exposing the double-dealing Anglo-French intrigues over Palestine and the Middle East, further undermined the prestige and positions of the colonial powers.

This activity and policy of the Soviet Government, pursued under the direct guidance of Lenin, had a deep influence on the national liberation movements throughout the world, on the thinking of the leaders of these movements, on the character and aims of the national organisation and on the growth of the people's national consciousness. This was shown by the great national upsurges which took place in the immediate post-1917 years in India, China, Korea, Indonesia, Mongolia, North Africa and the Middle East.¹⁰

The significant point is made by K. M. Pannikar¹¹ that "even more important than the added strength that the nationalist movements received" from the impact of the October Revolution was "the change in the character of nationalism itself". Before the October Revolution, he notes, the national liberation movements in Asia were "liberal and exclusively political", aimed solely at "freedom from foreign domination" and based on "parliamentary liberalism". The movements had "neither a defined social nor an economic objective, and were in that sense vague and Utopian. The Russian Revolution changed all this".

An indication of the influence of Lenin and the Soviet Union on the national liberation movements in the immediate post-1917 period was the decision of the Turkish students at Constantinople University to nominate Lenin in 1918 as their candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Decisive Contribution

Both in theory and in practice Lenin made a decisive contribution to the struggle for national liberation. He elaborated a dialectical approach to the national question which enabled him to guide the Soviet state and the international communist movement as to how this complex problem should be tackled; he educated the international working class movement to understand the relationship of their own struggle to that of the national liberation movement; he provided essential guiding lines for the conduct of the national liberation struggle

¹⁰ For details, see the author's "The October Revolution and the National Liberation Struggle", *Marxism Today*, January, 1968, pp. 14-24.

¹¹ K. M. Pannikar: *Asia and Western Dominance*, London, 1953, p. 252.

itself; he outlined the perspectives of a new and different transition to socialism by the liberated countries; and he revealed the great significance of the alliance of the three mighty revolutionary streams of our epoch—the socialist countries, the national liberation movements, and the international working class movement, including the powerful contingents in the imperialist countries.

Great dialectician as he was, Lenin never posed national independence and self-determination against the need for working class unity, and for the unity of all nations.

“Liberation of the colonies”, he wrote, “means self-determination of nations”.¹² But, he added, liberation of the colonies does not mean cutting oneself off from the colonial peoples.

“... we, Great-Russian workers, must demand from our Government that it get out of Mongolia, Turkestan, Persia; British workers must demand that the British Government get out of Egypt, India, Persia, etc. But does this mean that we, proletarians, wish to separate ourselves from the Egyptian workers and fellahs, from the Mongolian, Turkestan, or Indian workers and peasants? Does it mean that we advise the labouring masses of the colonies to ‘separate’ from the class-conscious European proletariat? Nothing of the kind. Now, as always, we stand and shall continue to stand for the closest association and merging of the class-conscious workers of the advanced countries with the workers, peasants and slaves of *all* the oppressed countries . . . We demand from our governments that they quit the colonies . . . And we demand this from existing governments and will *do* this when we are the government, *not* in order to ‘recommend’ secession, but, on the contrary, to facilitate and accelerate the *democratic* association and merging of nations . . . If we demand freedom of secession for the Mongolians, Persians, Egyptians and *all* other oppressed and unequal nations without exception, we do so not because we *favour* secession, but only because we stand for *free, voluntary* association and merging as distinct from forcible association. That is the *only* reason”.

The correctness of this approach was shown by Lenin in the brilliant way he handled the national question in the Soviet Union, by his making possible the free, voluntary association of the Soviet socialist nations, and by his attitude to the independence of Poland and Finland. The experience of the national liberation movement in the past few years in Africa and Asia has, in some cases, shown only too well what tensions are caused and dangers created for new young States when they ignore this valuable advice, and abandon the principle of *voluntary* association.

¹² V. I. Lenin: “A Caricature of Marxism and ‘Imperialist Economism’.” August-October, 1916, *Collected Works*, Vol. 23, pp. 52-58.

Joint Struggle

The other side of this advice of Lenin’s was the necessity for the workers in the oppressing countries to demand of their own governments that they quit the colonies, and to give solidarity to peoples struggling for national independence. And this, Lenin emphasised again and again, was in the interests of the workers in the imperialist countries as much as in the interests of the national liberation movements themselves.

“Socialists should explain to the masses of the *oppressor* nations that there will be no hope for their liberation as long as they help oppress other nations, as long as they refuse to recognise and uphold the latter’s right to self-determination, i.e., to free secession. Such is the socialist, as distinct from imperialist policy on the peace and national question to all countries”.¹³

Lenin saw that the colonial system, which oppressed the colonial people, was a source of corruption for the workers of the oppressing countries.

“... with the growth of colonialism, the European proletariat is *partly* placed in a position when it is *not* his labour, but the labour of the near-slaves in the colonies that maintains the whole of society . . .”¹⁴

It is, said Lenin, the extra profits drawn from colonial exploitation which creates

“a material and economic basis for infecting the proletariat with colonial chauvinism. Of course, this may be only a transitory phenomenon, but nonetheless the evil must be clear to us and its causes understood in order to be able to unite the proletariat of all countries for struggle against this brand of opportunism”.

Lenin called on all communist parties to “render direct aid to the revolutionary movements among the dependent and unequal nations (for example, Ireland, the Negroes in America, etc.), and in the colonies”.¹⁵ He returned to this theme in his speech on the Theses on the National and Colonial Question at the Congress of the Communist International, July 1920, stressing “the importance of revolutionary work by the communist parties not only in their own countries, but also in colonial countries . . .”.

The Communist Party of Great Britain, throughout the fifty years of its existence, has done its best to follow Lenin’s advice to render support to the

¹³ V. I. Lenin: “The Peace Question”: July-August, 1915. *Collected Works*, Vol. 21, pp. 265-266.

¹⁴ V. I. Lenin: “The International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart”. August-September, 1907. *Collected Works*, Vol. 13, pp. 59-61.

¹⁵ V. I. Lenin: “Preliminary Draft of Theses on the National and Colonial Questions”, June 1920. *Collected Works*, Vol. 31, pp. 122-128.

national liberation movements. India, China, Palestine, Ethiopia, Ireland, Cyprus, Guyana, Jamaica, Malaya, Indonesia, Korea, Egypt, Iraq, Algeria, Aden, Ghana, Nigeria, Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Namibia, South Africa, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cuba—these are among the countries for which our Party, in one form or another, has organised solidarity and helped to expose the activities of the imperialists. In our publications, in the *Daily Worker* and its successor, the *Morning Star*, we have consistently stood on the side of the peoples battling for independence and against the imperialists including our own Government.

Just Liberation Wars

Lenin's advice has also been invaluable for the national liberation movements themselves. As early as 1900, in the very first issue of *Iskra*, Lenin drew attention to the significance of colonialism.

"Every country with a rapidly developing capitalist industry very soon begins to look about for colonies, for countries, that is, with poorly developed industries and with more or less patriarchal systems, where manufacturing goods can be sold at a handsome profit. And it is for the sake of this profit of the capitalist gangs that the bourgeois governments have been waging endless wars, keeping large numbers of men in unhealthy tropical areas, spending millions of the people's money and driving the peoples of the colonial countries to starvation, despair and revolt".¹⁶

Such revolts, or national liberation wars, were fully justified, declared Lenin, and deserved the support of all socialists:

"For example, if tomorrow, Morocco were to declare war on France, India on England, Persia or China on Russia, and so forth, those would be 'just', 'defensive' wars, *irrespective* of who attacked first; and every socialist would sympathise with the victory of the oppressed, dependent, unequal states against the oppressing, slave-owning, predatory 'Great Powers'.¹⁷

The relationship of the imperialist colonial governments to the ruling capitalist class in the metropolis was well brought out by Lenin who explained, with considerable irony, that the task of securing huge profits for the Western powers from overseas investments is performed by "national committees of millionaires, termed governments, which are equipped with armies and navies and which 'place' the sons and brothers of 'Mr. Billion' in the colonies and semi-colonies in the capacity of

¹⁶ V. I. Lenin: "The Chinese War": *Iskra*, No. 1, December 1900, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 347-352.

¹⁷ V. I. Lenin: "Socialism and War": 1915, *Collected Works*, Vol. 21, pp. 271-276.

"viceroys, consuls, ambassadors, officials of all kinds, priests and other leeches".¹⁸

Invaluable guidance as to the approach necessary to defeat the "national committees of millionaires" was given by Lenin in the discussions on the Theses on the National and Colonial Questions at the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920. Lenin warned of two mistakes that could arise in the national liberation struggle. First, an underestimation of the national question, a tendency to see only "toilers" and not to recognise that sections of the bourgeoisie belong to the oppressed nation and can objectively play a part in the anti-imperialist struggle. Secondly, a tendency to tail behind the national bourgeoisie and neglect to safeguard the interests of the working class and the future of the revolution.

Already, a year earlier, Lenin had pointed out that the overwhelming majority of people in the world were involved in the question of self-determination, and that to insert the slogan "self-determination of the toilers" in place of "self-determination of nations" would be "absolutely wrong" since it would present the national question in a limited and distorted fashion.¹⁹ Polemising against Bukharin, Lenin warned against skipping stages, and advised the necessity to include in the Party programme not general proclamations but "what actually exists". We cannot, he stressed, go to the Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmens, and others under the influence of their mullahs and say: "We shall overthrow your exploiters". Rather "we have to . . . wait for the given nation to develop, for the "inevitable differentiation of the proletariat from the bourgeois element".

"A Clear Distinction"

Lenin's fundamental approach was made clear in the Preliminary Draft of the Theses on the National and Colonial Question prepared for the Second Congress of the Communist International.²⁰ Lenin pointed out that it was essential to make a clear distinction between oppressing, exploiting nations on the one hand, and oppressed, dependent and subject nations on the other, and that this was necessary not least in order to make clear that a handful of the richest capitalist countries were exploiting the vast majority of the peoples of the world.

At the same time, Lenin also stressed that in the

¹⁸ V. I. Lenin: "The United States of Europe Slogan": *Sotsial-Demokrat*, August 23, 1915, *Collected Works*, Vol. 21, pp. 308-311.

¹⁹ V. I. Lenin: Report on the Party Programme to the Eighth Congress, Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), March 19, 1919, *Collected Works*, Vol. 29, pp. 149-154.

²⁰ *Collected Works*, Vol. 31, pp. 122-128.

national struggle it was necessary to make “a clear distinction between the interests of the oppressed classes, of the toilers and exploited, and the general concept of national interests as a whole, which implies the interests of the ruling class”. The struggle for national independence, he indicated, was connected with the struggle against capitalism, for without a victory over capitalism “the abolition of national oppression and inequality is impossible”.

In setting out, in the Draft Theses, the tasks of Communists in respect of the struggle for national liberation, Lenin wrote of the need “for determined struggle against attempts to give a communist colouring to bourgeois-democratic liberation trends in the backward countries”, and then went on to explain the specific role of Communists in the national liberation movement:

“The Communist International should support bourgeois-democratic movements in colonial and backward countries only on condition that, in these countries, the elements of future proletarian parties, which will be communist not only in name, shall be brought together and educated to understand their special tasks, viz. to fight the bourgeois-democratic movements within their own nations. The Communist International must enter into a temporary alliance with bourgeois democracy in colonial and backward countries but must not merge with it and must under all circumstances uphold the independence of the proletarian movement even if in its most embryonic form”.

This advice—so important today for communists who have been faced with pressure from petty-bourgeois Governments and national parties in some countries of Asia and Africa to dissolve their Marxist-Leninist vanguard organisations and work as disconnected individuals within the wider national movement (pressure, incidentally, which has faced some Communist Parties with the most difficult tactical decisions and led to considerable complications and temporary setbacks)—was re-emphasised by Lenin in his Report of the Commission on the National and Colonial Questions.

In dealing with this question in his Report on the Commission’s work,²¹ Lenin first explained that the Commission had decided to use the term “national-revolutionary movement” rather than the term “bourgeois-democratic movement”. Of course, he said, the content of the national liberation struggle is bourgeois-democratic, since this movement is based overwhelmingly on the peasants “who represent bourgeois-capitalist relationships”, but with whom the working class in the colonial countries needs to enter into alliance. However, he stressed, it could be thought that by terming the movement “bourgeois-democratic” all distinction was being obliterated between “the reformist and the revolu-

tionary movement”. But such a distinction had to be made, “for the imperialist bourgeoisie is doing everything within its power to implant a reformist movement among the oppressed nations too”. Referring to a “certain rapprochement” between the bourgeoisie of the exploiting countries and those in the colonies, Lenin pointed out that, as a result, “very often—even in most cases, perhaps—where the bourgeoisie of the oppressed countries does support the national movement, it at the same time works hand in glove with the imperialist bourgeoisie, that is, joins forces with it against all revolutionary movement and revolutionary classes”.

It was for this reason that Lenin stressed once again that the use of the term “national revolutionary” signified that

“we, as Communists, should and will support bourgeois-liberation movements in the colonies only when they are genuinely revolutionary, and when their exponents do not hinder our work of educating and organising the peasantry and the broad mass of the exploited in a revolutionary spirit. If these conditions do not exist, the Communists in these countries must combat the reformist bourgeoisie . . .”

Tactics

Turning to the experience of Russian communists in the former tsarist colonies, Lenin explained the tactics that had to be pursued to win over the majority of the people who were peasants. The chief characteristic of such countries, he said, was the domination of pre-capitalist relationships, and as a result there could be “no question of a purely proletarian movement”. In fact, there was “practically no industrial proletariat”, but despite this and the difficulties which this presented to the Russian communists, it was possible to “inspire in the masses the urge for independent political thought and independent political action”.

In this connection, in his Draft Theses on the National and Colonial Questions, Lenin referred to the need to “give special support to the peasant movement against the landlords, against large land-ownership, and against all manifestations or survivals of feudalism, and to strive to lend the peasant movement the most revolutionary character”.

Warning against neo-colonialism (although this term was not then yet in use) he urged: “the need constantly to explain and expose among the broadest working masses of all countries, and particularly of the backward countries, the deception systematically practised by the imperialist powers, which, under the guise of politically independent states, set up states that are wholly dependent upon them economically, financially and militarily”.²² Lenin,

²¹ V. I. Lenin: Preliminary Draft of Theses on the National and Colonial Questions: op. cit., *Collected Works*, Vol. 30, pp. 130-141.

²² *Collected Works*, Vol. 31, pp. 215

in his Report on the Commission, and in other writings of that period developed one of his most inspiring and vital conceptions, that of the necessity of the colonial peoples to find their own distinct way to socialism, linked with the possibility of their carrying through a transition to socialism without going through the normal phase of capitalist development. And this possibility he connected with the alliance between the peoples of the formerly oppressed countries, and the working class in the industrially developed countries, and in the closest association with the Soviet Union.

In his Address to the Second All-Russian Congress of Communist Organisations of the Peoples of the East (November 22, 1919) Lenin told the delegates:

"You are confronted with a task which until now did not confront the Communists anywhere in the world: relying upon the general theory and practice of communism, you must adapt yourselves to peculiar conditions which do not exist in the European countries and be able to apply that theory and practice to conditions in which the bulk of the population are peasants, and in which the task is to wage a struggle not against capitalism, but against medieval survivals. That is a difficult and unique task, but a very thankful one, because those masses are being drawn into the struggle which until now have taken no part in it, and, on the other hand, because organisation of communist units in the East gives you the opportunity to maintain the closest contact with the Third International. You must find specific forms for this alliance of the foremost proletarians of the world with the toiling and exploited masses of the East whose conditions are in many cases medieval".

Touching on the particular tasks of communists in such countries, and on their need to "translate the true communist doctrine, which was intended for the Communists of the more advanced countries, into the language of every people", Lenin said that the communists in these countries faced problems "the solution of which you will not find in any communist book, but which you will find in the common struggle that Russia has begun. You will have to tackle these problems and solve them by your own independent experience".

No Mechanical Copying

In a letter to Orjonikidze, March 2, 1921, Lenin advised that in Georgia the Communists should "avoid mechanically copying the Russian pattern. They must skilfully work out their own flexible tactics, based on bigger concessions to the petty-bourgeois elements". One month later, in a letter to the Communists of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Daghestan, and the Highland Republic (April 14, 1921), he again stressed "the need not to copy our

tactics, but thoughtfully to vary them in adaptation to the differing conditions".²³ Advising "more moderation, caution, and readiness to make concessions to the petty-bourgeoisie, to the intelligentsia, and particularly to the peasantry", he urged "A slower, more cautious, more systematic transition to socialism—this is what is possible and necessary for the republics of the Caucasus". What was needed in the particular domestic conditions and because of the international situation, was to "apply not the letter, but the spirit, the essence, the lessons of the experience of 1917-21". And, bearing in mind the existing relationship of world forces, he wrote: "Economically, base yourselves at once on commercial intercourse with capitalist countries; do not begrudge the cost—even if tens of millions' worth of valuable minerals have to be sent abroad".

Lenin wisely understood that at that time such concessions to capitalism had to be made to preserve working class power and to give an opportunity for the new young republics in the Caucasus to gain a breathing space and start to build their new life. Such flexibility and realism in tactics was a marked feature of all Lenin's thought and activity in relation to the problems of national liberation.

By-passing Capitalist Development

Lenin's creative approach was also shown by the ideas he elaborated in his Report on the Commission on the National and Colonial questions, 1920,²⁴ when he formulated his significant conception about the possibility of colonies by-passing the stage of capitalist development.

"This is how the question had been posed: is the capitalist stage of economic development inevitable for those backward nations which are now winning liberation and in which progressive trends are to be observed since the war? We replied in the negative. If the victorious revolutionary proletariat conducts systematic propaganda among them, while the Soviet governments come to their assistance with all the means at their command—in that event, it would be wrong to assume that the capitalist stage of development is inevitable for the backward nationalities . . . (The) Communist International should advance and theoretically substantiate the proposition that these backward countries can, with the aid of the proletariat of the advanced countries, pass over to the Soviet system²⁵ and, through definite stages of development, to communism, without having to go through the capitalist stage".

This possibility of former colonial countries by-passing the capitalist stage was made possible, as Lenin indicated, by the emergence of the first

²³ *Collected Works*, Vol. 32, p. 137.

²⁴ *Op. cit.*

²⁵ i.e. socialism—Ed.

socialist state, the Soviet Union; and its further unfolding was connected with the support rendered to it by the international proletariat. In his speech to the Second All-Russian Congress of Communist Organisations of the Peoples of the East,²⁶ Lenin declared that the revolutionary movement of the oppressed peoples "can now develop effectively, can reach a successful issue, only in direct association with the revolutionary struggle of our Soviet Republic against international imperialism".

In his report of the Commission on the National and Colonial Questions to the Second Congress of the Communist International,²⁷ he pointed out that since the first world war "international relations, the whole world system of states, are determined by the struggle of a small group of imperialist nations against the Soviet movement and the Soviet states headed by Soviet Russia. Unless we bear that in mind we shall not be able correctly to pose a single national and colonial question, even if it concerns a very remote part of the world". Even before the October Revolution of 1917, writing in fact in the autumn of 1916, Lenin had indicated one of the important ways in which Communists could assist the national liberation movements:

"We shall bend every effort to draw closer to and merge with the Mongols, Persians, Indians and Egyptians; we consider it our duty and *in our interests* to do this, for otherwise socialism in Europe will not be *strong*. We shall endeavour to render these peoples, who are more backward and oppressed than we are, 'selfless cultural aid', to quote the splendid expression used by the Polish Social-Democrats; in other words, we shall try to help them to go over to the employment of machines, to making work easier, to democracy and socialism".²⁸

Certainly if one looks at the record of the Soviet Union in the past fifty-three years in assisting the national liberation movements and helping the liberated countries "to go over to the employment of machines"—seen so vividly in the giant structures of the Aswan High Dam in the UAR, and the Bilhai steelworks in India, and in countless other examples of industrial development, no less than in the military help given to the Arab countries, Cuba and Vietnam, and the various forms of economic, diplomatic and political assistance rendered to the countries of the "Third World", one cannot but be impressed by the splendid way in which Lenin's advice has been followed by the Soviet Union.

²⁶ *op. cit.*

²⁷ *op. cit.*

²⁸ *Collected Works*, Vol. 23, pp. 52-58.

National Liberation and Socialism

Lenin had a deep appreciation of the role of the national liberation struggle in the world revolutionary process:

"The Socialist revolution", he declared, "will not be solely, or chiefly, a struggle of the revolutionary proletarians in each country against their bourgeoisie—no, it will be a struggle of all the imperialist-oppressed colonies and countries, of all dependent countries against international imperialism . . . It is self-evident that final victory can be won only by the proletariat of all the advanced countries of the world, and we, the Russians, are beginning the work which the British, the French or the German proletariat will seal. But we see that they will not be victorious without the aid of the toiling masses of all the oppressed colonial people . . . The international proletariat is the only ally of all the hundreds of millions of toiling and exploited peoples of the East".²⁹

The same thought was expressed by Lenin in his Letter to the Eastern People's Propaganda and Action Council:

"The destiny of the whole of Western civilisation depends to an enormous degree on the working masses of the East being drawn into political life".³⁰

At the end of 1920, on December 6th, in a speech to Communist Party members in Moscow, Lenin recalled that at the Congress of the Communist International in Moscow he had said that the whole world was divided into oppressed and oppressing nations. "We are really acting now", he said, "not only as representatives of the proletarians of all countries, but also as representatives of the oppressed peoples". He then made reference to the new journal, *The Peoples of the East*, which had been issued by the Communist International, and which put forward the slogan: "Workers of all countries and oppressed nations, unite!" He revealed that one comrade had asked, apparently with some anxiety, "When did the Executive Committee decide on a change of slogans?" Lenin commented: "Indeed, I cannot remember any such decision. And, of course, from the standpoint of the *Communist Manifesto* this is wrong, but then the *Communist Manifesto* was written under totally different conditions. From the standpoint of present-day politics, this slogan is correct".

In this boldly creative way, never hesitating to reformulate the classic slogan of Marx and Engels, Lenin showed himself to be a true Marxist, ever ready to discard any slogan, any concept, if it no

²⁹ "Speech to Second All-Russian Congress of Communist Organisations of the Peoples of the East", *op. cit.*

³⁰ *Pravda*, April 22, 1957. Originally written after December 17, 1921.

longer conformed to reality, to the needs of the concrete situation itself.

To the end of his life, Lenin attached the greatest importance to the national liberation struggle and to its impact on the world-wide revolutionary struggle against capitalism. In his report to the Third Congress of the Communist International (June 5, 1921), he acclaimed "the millions and hundreds of millions—actually the overwhelming majority of the world's population" who were acting as "an independent and active revolutionary factor". And he went on to declare that "it should be perfectly clear that in the coming decisive battles of the world revolution, this movement of the majority of the world's population, originally aimed at national liberation, will turn against capitalism and imperialism and will, perhaps, play a much more revolutionary role than we have been led to expect". A year later, writing on the Tenth Anniversary of *Pravda*,³¹ he pointed out that hundreds of millions of people had been drawn into the world revolutionary struggle and had begun a movement "which even the 'mightiest' powers cannot stem. They stand no chance". And again, in one of his last articles ("Better Fewer, but Better", *Pravda*, March 4, 1923), he wrote that the colonial and oppressed people had "been definitely drawn into the general maelstrom of the world revolutionary movement" and that consequently, "In the last analysis, the outcome of the struggle will be deter-

mined by the fact that Russia, India, China, etc., account for the overwhelming majority of the population of the globe", and thus "the complete victory of socialism is fully and absolutely assured".

World in Transformation

Since Lenin's death there has been an enormous transformation of the world scene. In place of one socialist state, there are now fourteen, embracing about one third of the world's population. In place of the majority of mankind living under foreign colonial domination, scores of new independent states in Africa and Asia have come into existence, and their peoples are now entering the new stage of struggling to complete their liberation, to achieve their economic independence, and to end the various forms of imperialist exploitation to which they are still subjected.

Lenin's writings and speeches on questions of national liberation, his creative thinking on these problems, and his immense contribution which he made in practice to their solution, constitute one of the most significant features of his life's work.

One short slogan cannot, of course, do justice to his work in this vital sphere. But in summation, and expressive, too, of his creativity and readiness to advance new revolutionary concepts, one cannot do better than end by recalling his extension of the famous slogan of Marx and Engels, and to proclaim with him:

"Workers of all countries and oppressed nations, unite!"

³¹ *Pravda*, May 5, 1922, *Collected Works*, Vol. 33, pp. 312-315.