

Nationalism is a deadly poison for the class struggle

(Part 1)



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Introduction

Since nationalism is nothing to do with class struggle, the question is, what is nationalism and what does this question mean in various eras of capitalism, the period of capitalist development, as well as during the period of capitalist decay? What impact does nationalism have on class struggle? Furthermore, what is the Marxist definition of state, nation and imperialism? What kinds of approaches and beliefs did Marxists such as Marx, Engels, Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg have? What was the position of the communist left on this issue? When will man's oppression of human beings cease? In this text, we will try to formulate some answers to all these questions by examining the evolutionary process of capitalism. Therefore, we will try to refer to past experiences as much as possible by effectively applying real Marxist beliefs.

The national issue during the rise of capitalism

In the development process of capitalism, the creation of new nations was a progressive step in the development of productive forces. This meant that new nations were able to develop within a social framework, i.e., a world market. Therefore, they often lent communists and proletarian internationalists their support in national liberation movements. Indeed, this cooperation during the rise of capitalism is used today by leftists as an argument for their support of national liberation movements in the present historical epoch. In the meantime, the bourgeoisie remained a progressive and revolutionary class that struggled to unchain itself from feudalism. The bourgeois revolution against the feudal system was portrayed in a national form. Lenin describes this situation as follows:

“A precise formulation of this question, which no Marxist can avoid, would at once destroy nine-tenths of Rosa Luxemburg's arguments. This is not the first time that 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. For the complete victory of commodity production, the bourgeoisie must capture the home market, and there must be politically united territories whose population speak a single language, with all obstacles to the development of that language and to its consolidation in literature eliminated. Therein is the economic foundation of national movements. Language is the most important means of human intercourse. Unity and unimpeded development of language are the most important conditions for genuinely free and extensive commerce on a scale commensurate with modern capitalism, for a free and broad grouping of the population in all its various classes and, lastly, for the establishment of a close connection between the market and each and every proprietor, big or little, and between 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.”[1]

Yet, Marx already revealed the fraudulent nature of “national war” in 1871 when he wrote to the International Council on the occasion of the Paris Commune cases:

“The fact that the two armies from the largest military showdown in modern times, after the war, can be united to crush the proletariat is a thing of immense importance. But it does not as Bismarck imagines to work for the new form of society that has been made impossible for all time; on the contrary, it shows how the old bourgeois society is heading towards its total decomposition. **The National War symbolized the first form of heroism as the old type of society was powerful, and now this war has proven to be a pure giddiness.** The sole purpose was to divert attention away from class struggle and as soon as class struggle developed into civil war was any deceptive scenes aside. Class domination could no longer hide in the nationalist disguise: the national governments have come together to fight against the proletariat.”

The full support for the self-determination of nations or conditional aid

Marx, Engels and other communists did not support every national movement during the rise of capitalism, but only those movements that were progressive. On 21 July, 1870, Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel made the following historical declaration before the Reichstag:

“The present war is a dynastic war in the interest of the Bonaparte dynasty as the war of 1866 was conducted in the interest of the Hollenzollern dynasty.

“We cannot vote for the funds which are demanded from the Reichstag to conduct this war because this would be, in effect, a vote of confidence in the Prussian government. And we know that the Prussian government by its action in 1866 prepared this war. At the same time, we cannot vote against the budget, lest this be construed to mean that we support the conscienceless and criminal policies of Bonaparte.” [2]

What was the Second International’s position on this issue at its congress in London in 1896? Before finding out, we need to note that even the Second International lacked clarity on this issue. The following explains the Second International’s decision in this regard:

“This Congress declares that it stands for the full right of all nations to self-determination [Selbstbestimmungsrecht] and expresses its sympathy for the workers of every country now suffering under the yoke of military, national or other absolutism. This Congress calls upon the workers of all these countries to join the ranks of the class-conscious [Klassenbewusste -those who understand their class interests] workers of the whole world in order jointly to fight for the defeat of international capitalism and for the achievement of the aims of international Social-Democracy.”

“Workers of the world, unite!” instead of “Proletarians in developed countries, unite!” or “Classes in non-developed countries, unite!”

When Marx and Engels were tasked with write *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848, capitalism was only developed in a few countries, mainly England. One could say that today’s capitalism in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, etc. is more developed than was the case in England in the late 1840s. Yet, there was no call in *The Communist Manifesto* calling for proletarians in developed

countries and the classes in non-developed countries to unite! Instead, Marx and Engels, writing from a historical perspective, wrote: “Proletarians of all countries unite!”

When the whole capitalist system became decadent

”Side by side with England, one nation after another stepped into the world market, capitalism developed automatically, and with gigantic strides, into world economy.”

Luxemburg described the global historical process of capitalist development as a single and unitary process. She did not divide the world into different historical parts, namely, senile capitalism and youthful and dynamic capitalism. Capitalism is a unified system that has periods of evolution and decadence, as the International Communist Current explains:

“But as capitalist social relations became generalized throughout the original enclaves of capitalism the ‘push’ of capitalist production towards the rest of the world accelerated. Instead of competition between individual capitals for markets within the national framework, the emphasis was now on competition between national capitals for the remaining non-capitalist areas of the globe. This was the essence of imperialism, which is simply the expression of ‘normal’ capitalist competition on an ‘international’ scale, backed up of course by the armed state power which is the distinguishing characteristic of competition at this level.

As long as this imperialist development was restricted to a few advanced capitals expanding towards a still considerable non-capitalist sector of the world, competition remained relatively peaceful, except from the point of view of the pre-capitalist peoples who were being plundered wholesale by imperialist cartels (i.e. China and Africa). But as soon as imperialism integrated the whole world into capitalist relations, as soon as the world market became completely divided up, then global capitalist competition could only assume a violent and openly aggressive character from which no nation, advanced or backward, could ‘hold aloof’, since every nation had been irresistibly drawn into the rat-race of competition over a saturated world market.”

The nature of the First World War

The First World War marked a historic turning point in the history of capitalism. In other words, it emphasized capitalism in the transition from a period of evolution to a period of decadence. The First World War was the result of decadent capitalism throughout the world. The war altered the conditions of the working-class struggle but did not change the fundamental laws of capitalist society, namely, the struggle between capital and work. As Lenin said, our epoch is the epoch of proletarian revolution. Luxemburg described the process leading up to the First World War very well:

“The events that bore the present war did not begin in July 1914 but reach back for decades. Thread by thread they have been woven together on the loom of an inexorable natural development until the firm net of imperialist world politics has encircled five continents. It is a

huge historical complex of events, whose roots reach deep down into the Plutonic deeps of economic creation, whose outermost branches spread out and point away into a dimly dawning new world, events before whose all-embracing immensity, the conception of guilt and retribution, of defence and offence, sink into pale nothingness.”

The First World War was a consequence of **the entire capitalist system throughout the world** becoming decadent, with trades unions, parliaments, national movements and so on, **on a global level**, joining the bourgeoisie. This means that no further reform was possible during capitalism’s decadence in the world. Luxemburg skilfully explained the historic consequences of this situation:

“To the leading elements in the labour movement, the vote in favour of the war credits by the Reichstag group was a cue for the immediate settlement of all labour controversies. Nay more, they announced this to the manufacturers as a patriotic duty incurred by labour when it agreed to observe a civil peace. These same labour leaders undertook to supply city labour to farmers in order to assure a prompt harvest. The leaders of the social democratic women’s movement united with capitalist women for “national service” and placed the most important elements that remained after the mobilisation at the disposal of national Samaritan work. Socialist women worked in soup kitchens and on advisory commissions instead of carrying on agitation work for the party.

Under the anti-socialist laws the party had utilised parliamentary elections to spread its agitation and to keep a firm hold upon the population in spite of the state of siege that had been declared against the party and the persecution of the socialist press. In this crisis the social democratic movement has voluntarily relinquished all propaganda and education in the interest of the proletarian class struggle, during Reichstag and Landtag elections. Parliamentary elections have everywhere been reduced to the simple bourgeois formula; the catching of votes for the candidates of the party on the basis of an amicable and peaceful settlement with its capitalist opponents.”

The national question within decadent capitalism

The discussion on the national question has been very hard to resolve over the last 100 years. What is a communist perspective on the national question within decadent capitalism? Let us see what Kautsky has to say to us on this question before he became a **renegade**. In the pamphlet entitled *Patriotism and Social Democracy* from 1907, Kautsky wrote the following: "Meanwhile, it is becoming more and more unlikely that the proletarian and bourgeois patriotism again will join together to protect their own people freedom As long as the situation as is, no longer, in any country envisage the possibility of a national defense war, where the bourgeois patriotism can be reconciled with the proletariat."

In fact, during the decadence of capitalism cannot be any national defense war. Rosa Luxemburg was one of the first Marxists who analyzed this in her various works. When Kautsky became renegade and joined to the bourgeoisie, Rosa Luxemburg together with Lenin had a big

responsibility to defend Marxism against revisionism. Rosa Luxemburg's portrayal of this issue is very clear:

“The national phrase, to be sure, has been preserved, but its real content, its function, has been perverted into its very opposite. Today the nation is but a cloak that covers imperialistic desires, a battle cry for imperialistic rivalries, the last ideological measure with which the masses can be persuaded to play the role of cannon fodder in imperialistic wars.” [8]

The Italian Fraction of the Communist Left explains very clearly, in its magazine *Bilan* (No. 14), nation and state, and their role in the decadence of capitalism after the degeneration of the Third International. This explanation is very similar to Luxemburg's depiction:

“The nation is no ‘one domain’ of the ‘who was born there’, but belongs to the capitalists as the nation state by organizing the exploitation of workers and defending their interests against the competing states. The capitalist state and nation are two inseparable concepts. A nation without a state is as impossible as a state without a nation. Truth is that the latter is a social tool that is necessary to mobilize all classes of society for the bourgeoisie in their struggle for world supremacy. As an expression of the ruling class interests of the nation may have no basis other than to carry out repression, in another word, a State.”

More than 50 years later, one of *Bilan*'s successor describes “national liberation wars” as pawns in imperialist conflicts with ‘socialist’ aggression. The International Communist Current writes:

“The phrase ‘national liberation wars’ is included in the fight to the death between large and small imperialist powers to gain control over world markets. The slogan ‘support the struggling people’ is in fact a defence of an imperialist power against another with the help of nationalist or ‘socialist’ phrases.”

To Be Continued

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Notes:

[1] The Right of Nations to Self-Determination - Chapter 1, Lenin

[2] The Junius Pamphlet - Chapter 2, Rosa Luxemburg

[3] The Right of Nations to Self-Determination - Chapter 2, Lenin

[4] The Junius Pamphlet - Chapter 3, Rosa Luxemburg

[5] Nation or Class? - Chapter 3, ICC

[6] The Junius Pamphlet - Chapter 7, Rosa Luxemburg

[7] As above, Chapter 6

[8] IR N0 30