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The Russian Revolution and national freedom

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When Bolivian President Evo Morales formally opened his country's Constituent Assembly on August 6, 2006, he highlighted the aspirations of Bolivia's indigenous majority as the central challenge before the gathering. The convening of the Assembly, he said, represented a "historic moment to refound our dearly beloved homeland Bolivia."

When Bolivia was created, in 1825-26, "the originary indigenous movements" who had fought for independence "were excluded," and subsequently were discriminated against and looked down upon. But the "great day has arrived today ... for the originary indigenous peoples." [1] During the preceding weeks, indigenous organizations had proposed sweeping measures to assure their rights, including guarantees for their languages, autonomy for indigenous regions, and respect for indigenous culture and political traditions.

This movement extends far beyond Bolivia. Massive struggles based on indigenous peoples have shaken Ecuador and Peru, and the reverberations are felt across the Western Hemisphere. Measures to empower indigenous minorities are among the most prestigious achievements of the Bolivarian movement in Venezuela.

At first glance, these indigenous struggles bear characteristic features of national movements, aimed at combating oppression, securing control of national communities, and protecting national culture. Yet indigenous peoples in Bolivia and elsewhere may not meet many of the objective criteria Marxists have often used to define a nation, such as a common language and a national territory, and they are not demanding a separate state. The response of Marxist currents to the national aspects of Latin America's indigenous struggles has been varied, ranging from enthusiasm to a studied silence. Yet an ability to address the complexities of such struggles is surely the acid test of Marxism's understanding of the national question today.

Such disarray among Marxists is all the more costly in today's context of rising struggles for national freedom across Latin America and the Middle East today. The challenge is also posed in the imperialist heartlands, where we see a rise of struggles by oppressed minorities that bear more than a trace of national consciousness. For example, in 2006 the United States witnessed the strongest upsurge of working-class struggle in 60 years in the form of demonstrations and strikes for

immigrant rights that were also, in part, an assertion of Latino identity. And the oppression of non-white and Muslim minorities in France has given birth to the provocatively named “Mouvement des Indigènes de la République.” [2]

The Marxist position on the national question was forged around well-documented debates on the independence movement of long-constituted nations such as Ireland and Poland. But the writings of Lenin and his contemporaries before 1917 have little to say about nationalities in emergence, that is, peoples in struggle who lack as yet many characteristic features of a nation. But precisely this type of struggle played a central role in the 1917 Russian revolution and the early years of the Soviet republic. In the course of their encounter with such movements, the Bolshevik Party’s policies toward national minorities evolved considerably. Sweeping practical measures were taken to assure the rights of national minorities whose existence was barely acknowledged prior to 1917.

The Bolsheviks’ policies do not indicate what course to adopt toward national struggles today, each of which has a specific character and set of complexities. Nonetheless, the Bolshevik experience is a useful reference point.

Pre-1917 Positions

The initial position of Russian Marxists on the national question was clear and sweeping. In 1903 the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), adopted a program specifying the right of all nations in the Russian state to self-determination. The program also advocated regional self-rule based on the composition of the population and the right of the population to receive education in its own language and to use that language on the basis of equality in all local social and governmental institutions. [3]

In the decade that followed, the Bolshevik wing of the RSDLP became the first Marxist current internationally to recognize the importance of the liberation struggles then taking shape across the colonial world. Lenin wrote in 1913, “Hundreds of millions of people are awakening to life, light and freedom” in a movement that will “liberate both the peoples of Europe and the peoples of Asia.” [4]

Lenin also insisted on the distinction between the advanced capitalist countries, where “progressive bourgeois national movements came to an end long ago,” and the oppressed nations of Eastern Europe and the semi-colonial and colonial world. [5] In the latter case, he called for defense of the right to self-determination and support of national liberation movements, in order to create a political foundation for unification in struggle of working people of all nationalities.

Limitations

In the test of the Russian revolution, these and many other aspects of the Bolshevik’s pre-1917 positions proved to be a reliable guide. Some positions expressed before 1917, however, required modification.

For example, consider the definition of a nation provided in 1913 by Joseph Stalin: “A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.” [6] Stalin’s article was written in collaboration with Lenin and was viewed at the time as an expression of the Bolshevik position. His objective criteria are a good starting point for analysis, but they have sometimes been misused to justify denying national rights to indigenous and other peoples that appear not to pass the test.

In addition, Lenin stressed that his support for national self-determination “implies exclusively the right to independence in the political sense.” [7] In 1913, he stated, “Fight against all national oppression? Yes, certainly. Fight for any kind of national development, for ‘national culture’ in general? Certainly not.” [8] Lenin is sometimes quoted as being opposed to federalism as a form of state, although he also endorsed federation as a stepping stone to democratic integration of nations. [9]

Such pre-1917 positions are sometimes applied today in order to justify opposition to the demands of national liberation movements. But they should be interpreted in the light of the way the Bolshevik position was applied in the decisive test of revolution.

The indigenous peoples of tsarist Russia

The oppressed peoples that made up the majority of the pre-1917 tsarist empire can be broadly divided into two categories.

On the western and southern margins of the empire lived many peoples—among them the Finns, Poles, Ukrainians, and Armenians—that met all of Stalin’s objective criteria of nationality. As nations, they possessed clearly defined historical and cultural traditions. It was these peoples that the pre-1917 Bolsheviks had chiefly in mind when they discussed the national question.

But there were also many peoples in Russia—in the Crimea, on the Volga, in the Caucasus, and in central and northeast Asia—that had been subjected to settler-based colonization similar to that experienced by the Palestinians, the Blacks of South Africa, and—in much more extreme form—the indigenous peoples of the Americas. These subjects of the Russian tsar, whom the Bolsheviks often spoke of as Russia’s “Eastern peoples,” had seen their lands seized, their livelihood destroyed, and their language and culture suppressed. They had suffered discrimination and exclusion from the dominant society.

When revolution broke out in 1917, these peoples, although varying widely in their level of social development, had not yet emerged as nationalities. The evolution of written national languages, cultures, and consciousness as distinct peoples was at an early stage. Most identified themselves primarily as Muslims. Assessed by Stalin’s criteria for nationhood, they did not make the grade. But in the crucible of revolution, national consciousness began to assert itself, provoking and stimulating demands for cultural autonomy, self-rule, and even national independence.

This fact itself is worth pondering. A revolution is, in Lenin’s phrase, a festival of the oppressed. Peoples long ground down into inarticulateness suddenly find inspiration, assert their identity, and cry out their grievances. We cannot predict the shape of freedom struggles that will emerge in a revolutionary upsurge.

The soviets take power

On November 15, 1917, one week after the workers and soldiers of Russia took power, the Soviet government decreed the “equality and sovereignty of the peoples of Russia” and the right of these peoples to self-determination up to and including independence. [10] Subsequently, five nations on the western border, including Poland and Finland, asserted their independence, which the Soviet government recognized. Others opted to federate with the Russian Soviet republic.

But the matter did not stop there. The Soviet government invited each nation within Russia to hold a

soviet congress to decide whether and on what basis to participate in its federal structure. National minorities were offered not only the ultimate right to separate but autonomous powers over language, education, and culture that gave expression to the right of self-determination. The government spelled out this policy in April 1918 with reference to Russia's Eastern peoples in an article by Stalin, then its Commissar of Nationalities. These regions, he stated, must be "autonomous, that is have their own schools, courts, administrations, organs of power and social, political and cultural institutions," with full rights to use the minority language "in all spheres of social and political activity." [11]

This policy applied also to religious customs and traditions. Thus the Sharia—the Muslim common law—was recognized in traditionally Muslim territories as an integral part of the Soviet legal structure.

The Soviet government also endorsed the rights of the Muslim peoples to lands recently seized by Russian colonists, including when these lands had been utilized only seasonally by Muslim peasant nomads. It supported local initiatives to repossess such land in the North Caucasus and endorsed resettlement of Russian colonists in Turkestan as a means of restoring land seized by settlers after the defeat of an uprising of subject peoples in 1916.

It also worked to educate government personnel as to the social structure of the Eastern peoples. An appeal to Red Army personnel in 1920 urged that soldiers see the small independent producers and traders of these regions as allies, as toilers, not as profiteers. It noted that among these peoples, "a clear class differentiation has not yet taken place.... The producers have not yet been torn away from the means of production. Each handicraftsman ... is also a merchant. Commerce ... rests in the hands of millions of small traders, [each of whom] only has a penny's worth of goods." Given all this, "the rapid implementation of communism ... nationalization of all trade ... of handicraftsmen ... is impossible." This analysis is strikingly applicable to the conditions of the indigenous masses today in Bolivia and other Latin American countries. [12]

Promotion of national culture

With regard to the Eastern peoples, Soviet policy went far beyond support of land claims and autonomous governmental structures. The Soviet government supported the evolution into mature nationalities of peoples still only at the dawn of national consciousness. In this way, these peoples would be able to reach a cultural and political level that would facilitate their integration into Soviet society on a basis of equality.

The soviets therefore embarked on an ambitious program to promote national cultural development. Local experts were engaged to choose, for each ethnic group, the dialect best adapted to serving as the basis for a national language. Alphabets were devised for the mostly pre-literate peoples. Dictionaries and grammars were written and put to use in the publication of minority-language newspapers.

Education was started up in the minority languages, including within the Russian-speaking heartlands—in every locality where there were 25 students in the minority language group. By 1927, across the Soviet Union, more than 90% of students from minority nationalities were being educated in their own languages. The governments of autonomous republics were responsible for education in their national language beyond their own borders—a policy that bore some similarity to the Austro-Marxist program of "national-cultural autonomy" against which the Bolsheviks had argued prior to 1917.

The same principle applied to the Jewish minority, which had no national territory. A Jewish commission of the Soviet government administered hundreds of Yiddish-language schools scattered among several national republics. Many leaders of this body came from the Bund, a Jewish Socialist current that had advocated such structures, against Bolshevik objections, before 1917.

By 1924, publishing activity was under way in the Soviet Union in 25 different languages, rising to 44 in 1927.

Preferential hiring

The Soviet government strove to assure that each nationality was represented in local governmental organs in proportion to its size in the population as a whole. This policy was termed “korenizatsiia” — “indigenization” according to the Oxford dictionary, or “affirmative action” in modern idiom.

The Turkestan region of Central Asia provides a good test case, for there the soviets initially excluded Muslims from their ranks and turned a harsh face to the demands of the Muslim majority. In March 1918, the Soviet government called a halt to this policy, and when soviet elections were held in Turkestan the next month, 40% of those elected were Muslim. The proportion of Muslims in the local Communist Party membership rose from almost zero to 45% by the end of 1918. In 1919, the Communist Party central committee specified that candidates for government office could be nominated independently of the party by any Muslim workers’ organization.

One veteran of those days recalls that Lenin reacted angrily to information that all the soviets in Turkestan used the Russian language, saying, “All our talk about Soviet power will be hollow so long as the toilers of Turkestan do not speak in their native tongue in their institutions.” [\[13\]](#)

By 1927, minority nationals predominated in the soviet executive bodies in their regions.

The Communist Party universities, a major source of new cadres for party and state, gave preference to candidates from minority peoples. By 1924 these peoples made up 50% of the overall student body, roughly equal to their weight in the population. But it took time to make good the imbalance in party membership. By 1927, Muslim peoples’ weight in the party membership had reached about half their proportion of the population as a whole.

Efforts were also made to speed economic development in territories of the Muslim peoples. They were encouraged to enter the working class, which in these territories had previously been almost entirely Russian in composition. Progress was rapid: by 1926 minority peoples made up a majority of the work force in Tadzhikistan, Turkmenistan, and Dagestan, and about 40% in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan.

These achievements, of course, were possible only through the initiative and leadership of revolutionists from the minority nationalities themselves. With rare exceptions, there was no Bolshevik movement among the Muslim peoples prior to 1917. The leaders of this transformation came mainly from revolutionary nationalist movements—which many Marxists, then and now, disparagingly term “bourgeois.” The central leadership of the Communist Party repeatedly allied with these forces in order to overcome resistance to its policies toward Muslim peoples from within its own ranks. [\[14\]](#)

Baku Congress

The Bolsheviks argued within the Communist International in support of their approach toward oppressed nationalities, and it was codified by resolutions of the Comintern's Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East in 1920 and Second and Fourth World Congresses in 1920 and 1922. In his closing remarks to the Baku Congress, Gregory Zinoviev proposed an amended wording to the closing words of the Communist Manifesto: "Workers of all lands and oppressed peoples of the whole world, unite"—a concept that remains valid for our times. [15] And armed with this understanding, the International won support rapidly during those years across Asia.

The mood of these years is captured by Babayev, who attended the Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku as a young Muslim Azerbaijani in 1920, serving as a guard. Interviewed many years later, he recalled that "when the call to prayer came, he found it natural to set aside his gun during devotions, after which he would 'go back to defend with our blood the conference and the revolution.' Inspired by the [conference's] 'declaration of holy war against the enemy of revolution,' he explains, "thousands of people, convinced there was no contradiction between being a Bolshevik and a Muslim, joined the Bolshevik ranks." [16]

The Muslim delegates also utilized the Baku congress to voice their concerns about chauvinist abuses by Soviet officials in the autonomous republics. A lengthy resolution on this topic was submitted by 21 delegates, representing a wide range of nationalities. In his closing remarks, Zinoviev promised energetic corrective action. After the congress ended, 27 delegates traveled to Moscow to meet with the Communist Party Political Bureau, which adopted a resolution drafted by Lenin. The resolution's sweeping provisions included the decision to found the University of the Peoples of the East and instructions to rein in the authority of emissaries of the central government in autonomous regions.

Stalinist reversal

During the 1920s, a privileged bureaucratic caste arose in the Soviet Union, headed by Stalin, which showed increasing hostility to the rights of minority nationalities. This trend led Lenin, in his last months of activity, to launch a campaign to defend the rights of these peoples. [17]

After Lenin's death in 1924, the Stalinist forces gained control of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Soviet state apparatus. Soviet republics in Asia were subjected to bureaucratic centralization, chauvinist policies, hostility to minority language rights, and massive counterrevolutionary terror. Nonetheless, the gains of the Russian revolution in the domain of national rights were not wholly extinguished. In particular, the Asian Soviet republics retained enough strength to successfully assert their independence when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

Conclusion

Lenin's pre-1917 articles on self-determination provided the Bolsheviks with a foundation for their course during the revolution. But the Bolshevik approach to the struggle of the oppressed nationalities was radically enhanced by the experiences of the revolution itself. In the process, the Bolsheviks showed a capacity to ally with and learn from the most advanced fighters for national freedom. They set aside old schemas and allowed real social forces to shape their strategy, one that might today be called "unity through diversity."

Today, in the midst of a new rise of liberation struggles in several continents, the policies of the Bolsheviks of Lenin's time provide an example of how the working class can ally with oppressed peoples in common struggle. The unity of the working class depends on solidarity with oppressed peoples and sectors. The program of this struggle includes not just political self-determination for oppressed nationalities, but unconditional support for their struggle to win the political, cultural, and economic rights needed to achieve genuine equality. And that may well involve—as in the case of the indigenous peoples of Russia in the years following the 1917 revolution—positive measures to assist these peoples in developing their cultural and political potential as nationalities.

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Further Reading

This study has drawn extensively on Jeremy Smith's important work, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, which utilizes Soviet archives released after 1990. See also Dave Crouch, "The Bolsheviks and Islam," in *International Socialism* no. 110.

In the Pathfinder Press series, "The Communist International in Lenin's Time," edited by John Riddell, see *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International* for the pre-1917 discussion; *To See the Dawn*, for the Baku Congress; and *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite*, for the Second World Congress.

P.S.

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<http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2006/11/01/the-russian-revolution-and-national-freedom/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://boliviarising.blogspot.com/1>, Aug. 14, 2006

[2] www.indigenes-republique.org/2

[3] Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-23*, London: Univ. of London, n.d., p. 14.

[4] V.I. Lenin. *Collected Works*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960-71. Vol. 19, pp. 99-100. Most quotations in this study can also be located by Internet search.

[5] CW 22:150-52

[6] J.V. Stalin. *Works*, Moscow: FLPH, 1954. Vol. 2, p. 307.

[7] CW 22:146

[8] CW 20:35

[9] CW 22:146

[10] John Riddell, ed. *To See the Dawn* [hereinafter cited as TSD]. New York: Pathfinder Press,

1983, p. 248.

[11] Smith, p. 24.

[12] TSD 307.

[13] Smith, p. 145.

[14] For Lenin's comments in 1920 on the terminological side of this question, see Riddell, ed. *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite*. New York: Pathfinder, 1991. Vol. 1, p. 212 or Lenin, CW 31:241, or do an Internet search for "unanimous decision to speak of the national-revolutionary movement".

[15] TSD 219.

[16] TSD 29-30.

[17] See "Lenin's Final Fight," Pathfinder Press, or do an Internet search for Nationalities or "Autonomisation".