

Irish Revolution - Easter 1916 at 100: Its Marxian Dimension - Lenin and the character of national liberation movements

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What the late British historian Eric Hobsbawm called “the short 20th century” is said to have begun with the Great War of 1914 and ended in 1989-91 with the collapse of the Soviet bloc. This remarkably bloody short century is seen as marked by Nazism, Stalinism, World War II and the Holocaust, and then the Cold War. As Theodor Adorno famously put it after 1945, humanity had experienced “progress,” albeit from the slingshot to the megaton bomb.

But to look at things only through such a lens risks falling into the trap of Eurocentrism. The 20th century was also marked by cataclysmic events in the Global South, by the self-liberation of large swathes of Asia and Africa from centuries of racially-tinged colonialism and imperialism, and by the rise — at least for a time — of progressive forms of nationalism that held out the promise of a new world, free of racism and other forms human oppression, including gender subordination.

Moreover, it can be argued that the 20th-century uprisings of the colonized world began on that fateful Easter Monday of 1916. A small band of armed Irish nationalists took over government buildings in Dublin that day, were defeated after a few days, and their leaders executed. Among those leaders was the Marxist James Connolly, for whom one of the major Dublin train stations is named. Most at the time concluded that the 800-year reign of Britain was intact. Few that year could have predicted that this uprising would, within a few years, lead to most of Ireland being liberated by socially progressive nationalists, who enacted a mostly secular republican constitution that enfranchised women. To be sure, many of these gains eroded over time, as the clergy and other socially conservative forces reasserted themselves. But there was no going back.

Easter 1916 and the subsequent Irish Civil War for independence were celebrated prominently at the time by African and Asian freedom fighters, and by groups as seemingly different as Marcus Garvey’s militant United Negro Improvement Association in the US, in which Malcolm X’s father was active.

Easter 1916 was also debated that year by some of the leading revolutionary Marxists of the last century: the Russians V. I. Lenin and Leon Trotsky, as well as the Pole Karl Radek, who had worked for many years with Rosa Luxemburg. Their debate not only reflected the events in Ireland, but also marked a turning point in Marxism, one that would make it truly relevant to the Global South.

In 1916, these future leaders of the Russian revolution were hardly known outside their region, and their writings were confined largely to small exile journals. For the past several years, people like them had been debating the relationship of war to imperialism, with Lenin having begun to write his classic *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), while his Polish-German colleague Luxemburg had published her *Accumulation of Capital: A Contribution to an Explanation of Imperialism* in 1913. Lenin and Luxemburg saw imperialism not as a vestige of the past, but as an ultra-modern phenomenon. Without new colonies to control and exploit, capitalism would run out of steam, and the desperate competition for such colonies had played no small role in bringing on the

cataclysm of 1914. Lenin saw imperialism and monopoly as new stage of capitalism.

A second debate among these Marxists concerned the fate of national independence movements in the era of imperialism. While all of them sympathized with the plight of the exploited colonial subjects, they were divided over the solution. Some, like Luxemburg and her formerly close colleague Radek, as well as Lenin's younger colleague Nikolai Bukharin, held that small nations were on the way out in era of imperialism, just as small capitalist firms were being overwhelmed by large monopolies. Moreover, the destructive and reactionary character of nationalism was proved decisively by the war.

Radek helped to launch the Marxist debate over the Easter uprising soon afterward, in a polemical article of May 1916 entitled, "Their Song Is Played Out." He wrote that the Irish peasants were no longer the revolutionary force of Marx's time, as they had been bought off by economic concessions. The current uprising had a more conservative agenda: "This movement, called 'Sinn Fein,' was a purely urban petty-bourgeois movement" with "little social backing." Therefore, Ireland had experienced not a revolutionary uprising, but a "putsch that the British government easily disposed of." (This article and the ones by Trotsky and Lenin discussed above can be found in Lenin's *Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, edited by John Riddell.)

At the same time, Radek termed the British repression that was sure to follow a "criminal act."

In July 1916, Trotsky weighed in, taking a similar, albeit less condescending position. He, too, concluded that nationalism as a political force was spent, that the "historical basis for a national revolution has disappeared even in Ireland," calling the rebels "nationalist dreamers."

To be sure, nationalism within the Irish working class was understandable, given "the egotistically narrow and imperially arrogant trade unionism of Britain," which made class unity across the two islands more difficult.

However, such nationalist uprisings were not the solution, and Easter 1916 represented "the outworn hopes and methods of the past." The future lay with the international class struggle and trade union movement.

Lenin took up the debate a few months later, in the fall of 1916. In that period, with very few allies even among other revolutionary Marxists, he had been arguing for what he saw as a more dialectical view: Imperialism strengthened capitalism to be sure, but it also exhibited an internal contradiction, whereby oppressed nations and peoples were rising up in resistance. If that resistance took a progressive form — that of a national liberation movement — it could become an ally, not a competitor, of the socialist and labor movements of the imperialist countries.

Easter 1916 gave Lenin the concrete example he was seeking. He refuted the notion that the uprising had a narrow social base, calling such arguments a "doctrinaire" dismissal of the evidence of a mass movement that had been building in the months before Easter. Rather than a throwback to the past, Easter 1916 was a harbinger of the future, of the crisis that global capitalism was sure to undergo in the aftermath of the war. "It is the misfortune of the Irish that they rose prematurely," he wrote. Lenin, who had been intensively studying Hegel and the dialectic in the preceding months, concluded at a more general level that Easter 1916 illustrated the fact that, "The dialectics of history are such that small nations, powerless as an independent factor in the struggle against imperialism, play a part as one of the ferments" that would challenge global capitalist system.

While couched in very careful language, this was an important innovation in Marxist and radical thought, at a time when the global left was very rightly concentrating on the reactionary character

of nationalism, as seen in the war that was tearing Europe apart. The Irish women and men who rose up on Easter 1916 gave substance to what had up to then been an abstract theoretical debate, giving the world a shining example of the progressive and revolutionary character of national liberation movements.

Despite the many and necessary criticisms that need to be made of Lenin today — over his vanguard party concept, his single party state once in power, etc. — this analysis of imperialism and national liberation stands even today as one of the great political insights of the last century. For Lenin had dialectically parsed the category of nationalism, dividing it into great power nationalism (reactionary), on the one hand, and the nationalism of small, oppressed nations (sometimes progressive and revolutionary), on the other.

Without Lenin's writings on national liberation and the support the new Soviet Union gave to anti-colonial movements, it is doubtful that Marxism would have gained such a deep influence in places like India, China, southern Africa or Latin America.

In the 1930s and 1940s, these writings on national liberation influenced strongly some key US radical thinkers, like W.E.B. Du Bois, CLR James, Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee Boggs. It has also been reported that Frantz Fanon was carrying some of them around with him during the last months of his life, as he was writing his epochal *Wretched of the Earth*.

Today, the left has turned largely against nationalism, in the wake of a new era of globalization and the problematic outcome of so many national liberation movements once in power. However, I think we need to recognize that the phenomenon of national liberation still has some life, when one looks at groups like the Kurds, the Palestinians, or those who called themselves the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). In short, we need to take a more nuanced, dialectical view.

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P.S.

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