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# **Russian History & Anti-imperial Marxism - Borderland socialists and the evolution of Bolshevism on national liberation**

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## **Introduction**

Given the importance Marxists place on the fight against racial and national oppression, it is surprising that relatively little attention has been paid to the socialists of imperial Russia's borderlands. Most of the inhabitants of the tsarist empire were non-Russian (Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, Finns, Latvians, Georgians, Muslims, etc.), as were most revolutionaries. Yet academic and activist historiography has distorted our understanding of the socialist movement's overall development by narrowly focusing on Central Russia.

This article examines some of the major debates on the national question between borderland and Russian Marxists before the 1905 revolution. In the empire's periphery—notably Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, the Caucasus, and Ukraine—non-Russian Marxist parties sought to tie national liberation to a class struggle orientation. Most advocated a united revolutionary movement on the basis of national autonomy or federalism.

In this early period, both V. I. Lenin and the *Iskra* current to which he belonged were less sympathetic to national aspirations than has usually been assumed. *Iskra's* push for working-class unity was undermined by the limitations of its stance on the national question. Many of the positions later championed by Lenin and the Communist International were in these years opposed by *Iskra* and advocated by non-Russian socialists.

In the following sections I outline the key issues where the differences between *Iskraists* and borderland Marxists in the years preceding 1905 were at their clearest: i.e., regarding empire-wide party centralism, national oppression, assimilationism, and state federalism. As such, this article does not address important topics such as the Polish question and “the right to self-determination,” the Jewish Bund's push for “national” party organization, the internal conflicts among the borderland Social Democrats themselves, and their political evolutions during and following the 1905 and 1917 revolutions. [[1](#)]

My more limited aim here is, first, to present some of the pioneering contributions of non-Russian socialists towards the development of a Marxist approach to national liberation. Given that so much socialist historiography on this question has been based primarily on the writings of V. I. Lenin and Joseph Stalin, I seek to address this imbalance by highlighting the arguments of the borderland Marxists. Second, by stressing the early limitations of both Lenin and his comrades—their positions, as will be shown, often diverged—this article seeks to demonstrate the extent to which their politics changed over many years through political conflicts and accumulated experience. The axiom that Marxism develops through learning from the actual practice of working-class struggle is well illustrated by the transformation of Russian Marxists' approach to the national question.

Eventually the Bolsheviks overcame their earlier limitations and implemented an effective strategy of national liberation. Though Lenin's evolution began in 1913, the fundamental turn in the practice of the Bolshevik party as a whole came after the 1917–20 defeats of socialist revolutions in Finland, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Poland, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. In response to these setbacks, numerous Bolsheviks in all levels and regions concluded that addressing non-Russian national aspirations was an urgent necessity. To root the Soviet regime among non-Russian peoples, the Bolsheviks from 1921–23 onwards actively developed national cultures and languages, implemented state federalism, and promoted borderland Marxists to leadership positions.

Had the Bolsheviks reoriented their approach years earlier they may have more successfully built a base among non-Russians and more effectively spread socialist revolution beyond Central Russia. Understanding the complexities of this history is important for those of us who seek to uphold and develop the best traditions of Bolshevism and the early Communist International.

## **Revolutionary socialism**

It is necessary to begin by noting that all those parties engaged in this early debate considered themselves revolutionary socialists and generally acted as such. [2] The following statement by the Latvian Social Democratic Union (LSS) was typical:

*“We are not nationalists, we are socialists. We will never forget that our first calling is to awaken, enlighten and liberate the working class from political and economic slavery. We address the national question only in so far as it is important for these goals.”* [3]

None of the borderland social democratic (i.e., Marxist) parties at this time advocated the prioritization of national over class demands, promoted national development as an end in itself, or supported cross-class “national unity.” All believed workers of different nationalities should unite for their common interests. Borderland Marxists' activities in the workers' movement in this period were remarkably similar to their Russian comrades: they organized strikes, demonstrations, study groups, and distributed illegal revolutionary papers and proclamations denouncing the bourgeoisie and the tsar. The militant practices of the borderland SDs became evident to all during the 1905 revolution, which advanced furthest in the non-Russian regions.

Consider, for example, the politics of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS). In its 1892 founding program, the PPS declared:

*“The Polish Socialist Party, as the party of the working masses, fights against all class governments. . . . The Polish Socialist Party demands the complete abolition of class rule. . . . Therefore, it sets as its primary goal the conquest of political power for the proletariat and by the proletariat.”* [4]

The PPS advocated unity and collaboration between workers of different nationalities within Poland

and across the empire, including with Russians. [5] An 1894 editorial in the party's newspaper *Robotnik* (Worker) counterposed a class struggle perspective to hollow patriotism:

*"The principles of the Polish Socialist Party are known. Our party is primarily a workers party, its goals and demands are the expression of the interests of the working class: it leads the class struggle against the capitalists, and prepares and organizes the masses for this. . . . Every effort in this direction, even those without political slogans, every clash of the workers against the manufacturers, we consider much more valuable for the cause of freedom than the loudest patriotic cry. . . . Those who abstain from such clashes cannot belong to the party, they are imposters."* [6]

According to the PPS, only the proletariat could defend the Polish nation and win national independence, as the Polish upper class had capitulated to the occupying power. [7] In light of the accommodation of borderland bourgeoisies to tsarist rule, it was understandable that cross-class nationalism held little appeal for non-Russian revolutionaries. In short, the PPS promoted both the class struggle and national independence, though significant internal differences over how to synthesize and balance these goals, and how to ally with Russian revolutionaries, existed from the party's inception. One wing led by Joseph Pilsudski prioritized winning national independence, but by 1903 it was in a minority inside the Polish organization; contrary to the claims of many writers, the PPS as a whole in these years should not be considered a nationalist party. [8]

The PPS's Marxist statements did not remain only on paper. The PPS was primarily involved in the workers' movement and its push for collaboration with Russians found a favorable response from the federalist Russian Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), as Russian Iskraists preferred an alliance with Rosa Luxemburg's smaller and stridently anti-nationalist party (the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania-SDKPiL). In 1904 and 1905 the PPS and SRs collaborated closely, co-organized conferences, led revolutionary work in the tsarist army, and issued joint proclamations. [9]

During the 1905 revolution, the PPS was often more active in building unity with the Central Russian revolutionary movement than Luxemburg's SDKPiL: in November the PPS sent party leader Feliks Kon to the St. Petersburg soviet to help coordinate the empire-wide struggle. [10] Similarly, the PPS initiated a semi-insurrectionary general strike in December 1905 across Poland in response to the Moscow workers' uprising. [11] In 1906, the Pilsudski minority was expelled by the PPS's Marxist majority; the PPS-Left's subsequent attempts to join the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party (RSDRP) failed only because they were blocked by Luxemburg's organization, which in 1906 had demanded and won this veto power as a precondition for joining the RSDRP. [12]

The Jewish Bund also advocated class struggle and internationalism. According to Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov, Bundists were no more than "Zionists afraid of seasickness." [13] Such a statement, however, says more about Plekhanov than it does about the Bund, which declared that Zionists and Social Democrats (SDs) were "unconditional enemies between whom there are no points in common." [14] For Bund leader Vladimir Medem, "solidarity of the whole nation means giving up the class struggle, means peace between proletariat and bourgeoisie, means spiritual and material enslavement of the proletariat." [15] Chaim Weizmann, chairman of the World Zionist Organization, lamented:

*"Our hardest struggle everywhere is conducted against the Jewish Social Democrats (the Judischer Arbeiterbund of Russia and Poland). . . . Saddest and most lamentable is the fact that although this movement consumes much Jewish energy and heroism, and is located within the Jewish fold, the attitude it evidences towards Jewish nationalism is one of antipathy, swelling at times to fanatical hatred."* [16]

Like Iskra, the Bund was committed both in theory and practice to building proletarian unity across national divisions. The most effective means to achieve this goal, Bundists argued, was through national-Marxist organizations that would closely coordinate on a local, regional, and statewide level. One need not share this perspective to take it seriously as a plausible socialist strategy.

The most successful example of the Bund's organizational approach was in Latvia, where it established a Federal Committee with the Latvian Social Democratic Workers Party (LSDSP) in Riga. The responsibility of the Federal Committee was to coordinate SD work in multinational workplaces; organize strikes and demonstrations; issue common proclamations; agitate among students, teachers and in the army; and distribute illegal literature. In all other questions, the national SD organizations were independent. [17] During the revolutionary upsurge of 1905, the Federal Committee won hegemony over the entire working class and established de facto proletarian rule over Riga late in the year. Across the empire throughout 1905, the Bund's practice was consistently revolutionary Marxist, as it organized strikes and armed struggle, built cross-ethnic collaboration, and rejected any blocs with liberals or nationalists. Because of the Bund's demonstrated militancy during 1905, it was the Bolsheviks who successfully pushed for its reintegration into the RSDRP in 1906, against the objections of the Mensheviks. [18]

On various issues, borderland socialists were even more radical than the Russian SDs. For example, all Russian Marxists at this time saw the conquest of a democratic republic as the immediate task of the impending revolution. Leftists in the Polish PPS, however, argued for the possibility and desirability of moving straight to a socialist revolution, thereby pioneering the strategy of tying national liberation to socialist revolution later famously articulated in Leon Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. In the words of PPS leader Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz, "Who says that the Polish republic that we will win shall necessarily be a bourgeois state? . . . The day we kick out the Tsarist invasion—the main obstacle to (the socialist program's) implementation—we will do everything possible at the same time, it goes without saying, to socialize the means of production." [19]

Similarly, the Latvian LSS declared that it did not fight for a bourgeois republic, as the task of the proletariat was to "go beyond" this demand, towards a workers' democracy. [20] At a moment when most SDs across Russia and Europe thought that the bourgeois-democratic state could be seized by the working class and transformed into a vehicle for socialism, the LSS—twelve years before Lenin's State and Revolution—explicitly quoted and praised Marx's declaration that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes." [21] Social and national liberation, it argued, could only be won through smashing the capitalist state:

*"This new society in the Baltic can only be created through the conscious work of the Latvian national proletariat and this work can only be carried out if the proletariat governs the political activity in our land. We strive to show the working class that this can happen only by destroying the bourgeois state, that only establishing a proletarian state—i.e., by sharpening and furthering the class war to its conclusion—will make possible the founding of a new society in the Latvian land, where there will be no exploiters or exploited. It will be a new Latvia, a Latvian state, a Latvian democracy."* [22]

After the defeat of the 1905 revolution, the tumultuous geopolitics of World War I, and the polarization of the October Revolution, some (though not most) of the borderland parties became reformist and/or nationalist. Throughout the crucial period of 1917-1923, socialist conflicts over the national question became inextricable from fundamental differences over whether the unfolding revolution should seek to overthrow capitalism or limit itself to establishing a bourgeois democracy. But in the years before 1905 borderland socialists and Russian SDs generally shared a common strategic outlook on the basic questions of working-class independence, internationalism, and anti-tsarist revolution. Their differences concerned how these goals could be effectively reached and how

to incorporate national liberation into the general revolutionary struggle.

### **Party federalism and centralism**

Of all the debates between Russian and borderland SDs, the conflict over party organization was the most concrete and the most immediate. As such, it fed into the factional context in which the broader polemics on the national question, discussed below, took place. *Iskra* (The Spark), a predominantly Russian Marxist current founded in 1900, aimed to build a centralized empire-wide party capable of leading a successful overthrow of the autocracy. Lenin made a strong case for this perspective:

*“In matters pertaining to the struggle against the autocracy, the struggle against the bourgeoisie of Russia as a whole, we must act as a single and centralized militant organization, have behind us the whole of the proletariat, without distinction of language or nationality, a proletariat whose unity is cemented by the continual joint solution of problems of theory and practice, of tactics and organization; and we must not set up organizations that would march separately, each along its own track; we must not weaken the force of our offensive by breaking up into numerous independent political parties.”* [23]

As is well known, Iskraists objected to the Bund for organizing Jews separately from other workers and for advocating a decentralized empire-wide party. It is important to distinguish between these two issues, which have often been conflated in the historiography. While *Iskra*’s advocacy of multiethnic organizations was generally shared by SDs in the borderlands, its stance on All-Russian organizational centralization was widely rejected.

All of the borderland parties at this time—whether or not they organized one or more nationalities—rejected *Iskra*’s push for a single centralized All-Russian party. [24] A leader of Rosa Luxemburg’s anti-nationalist SDKPiL, for example, argued: “To accept these terms [*Iskra*’s organizational proposal] means agreeing to the destruction of our party, making her one of the local organizations of the Russian party, which given the state of the struggle in Russia would be detrimental to our movement.” [25] Most SDs advocated a looser federal party to unite SDs across the empire. One of the main reasons that the Bund, and not the other non-Russian parties, found itself at the center of the conflict with *Iskra* was simply that it had been part of the RSDRP since its 1898 founding congress (which the Bund had hosted in Minsk), thus it could not be ignored.

Recognition of a federal status for the Bund would have undermined *Iskra*’s central organizational project: the overcoming of the atomization of Russian Marxism. At the turn of the century, SDs in Central Russia were dispersed and narrowly focused; *Iskra*’s party-building plan was above all an effort of militants oriented to Russian-speaking regions to overcome this ineffective *kustarnichestvo* (amateurish localism). [26] Given the growing revolutionary upsurge, according to *Iskra* it was urgently necessary to connect the atomized circles into a powerful centralized All-Russian party capable of leading the rapidly rising tide of revolutionary struggle to overthrow the autocracy.

Lenin argued that the ideal relationship of the central leadership towards the local committees should be like that of a conductor in an orchestra towards the musicians.<sup>27</sup> Along these lines, at the RSDRP Second Congress he rejected placing any explicit limits on the powers of the central party leadership: “The Central Committee must be allowed to determine for itself the sphere of its own competence, since any local matter might affect the interests of the Party as a whole, and the Central Committee should be in a position to intervene in local affairs, even, perhaps, going against local interests, if such action was in the interests of the Party as a whole.” [27] Martov similarly defended the unrestricted right of the Central Committee to dissolve local committees. [28]



In the eyes of Iskra, the Bund's resistance to party centralization was not qualitatively different from Russian circles in St. Petersburg or Moscow that placed their own narrow focus above the needs of the broader struggle. Martov argued that for the sake of the revolution the Bund needed to abandon this myopic *kustarnichestvo*, which had "brought our movement into a blind alley." [29] He warned that if the Bund were granted its organizational proposals, other SD committees across the country would then make this same demand for local control. [30]

A centralized Marxist party across the empire certainly would have been a tremendous political lever against the tsarist state. Lenin's organizational perspective was not rooted in a dictatorial desire for absolute control, as so many anticommunist writers have claimed, but rather a commitment to overcoming the dispersion of the empire's socialist forces, to more effectively fight for political freedom and socialism:

*"The accursed history of autocracy has left us a legacy of tremendous estrangement between the working classes of the various nationalities oppressed by that autocracy. This estrangement is a very great evil, a very great obstacle in the struggle against the autocracy, and we must not legitimize this evil or sanctify this outrageous state of affairs by establishing any such "principles" as separate parties or a "federation" of parties. . . . The more we realize the need for unity and the more firmly we are convinced that a concerted offensive against the autocracy is impossible without complete unity, the more obvious becomes the necessity for a centralized organization of the struggle in the conditions of our political system."* [31]

Iskra's organizational objective was legitimate, arguably even ideal. Far less clear is whether a centralized party was indispensable for the overthrow of tsarism; whether such a party was achievable in the specific context of the Russian empire at the turn of the century; and, in these conditions, whether Iskra's organizational moves were the most effective to build All-Russian proletarian unity.

There were several problems with *Iskra's* perspective. First, it tended to conflate the dynamics in Central Russia with that of the empire as a whole. By 1903-04, Polish, Jewish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, Latvian, and Finnish socialists had already moved beyond disconnected circles and had built parties centralized on a regional level. Reflecting the social and geographic distance between the various peoples living under the tsarist state, these parties had arisen and cohered separately from each other.

Given the strong traditions of federalism in the tsarist empire's socialist movement, as well as the "orthodox" precedent of the Austrian Social Democracy's 1897 decision to organizationally federate itself, Iskra's stance on All-Russian centralization was far more controversial than that of the Bund. Finnish scholar Antti Kujala notes that Lenin and Iskra's centralizing stance was "a real innovation." [32] To view opposition to empire-wide centralization as analogous to the *kustarnichestvo* of small circles in Central Russia was a questionable leap on *Iskra's* part. The Bund, like the other borderland parties, did not object to centralization as such. In fact, the Bund was a highly centralized and relatively top-down party that granted its own central committee as extensive powers as proposed by Iskra. [33] Iskraists repeatedly pointed to the Bund as a model for an efficient and disciplined underground apparatus. [34]

The debate was whether this centralization should be extended across the state and whether empire-wide workers' unity had to take the form advocated by Iskra. In response to Lenin's declaration that the Bundists were "nationalists" who made a "mockery" of calls for proletarian unity, the Bund replied: "We ask Iskra: Do you seriously believe that 'joint struggle' [uniting workers of different nationalities] presumes only one type of organization, that of Iskra? That 'joint struggle' is impossible in any other organizational form?" [35]

Opposition to Iskra's All-Russian organizational approach was rooted in various overlapping dynamics. One contributing factor was that borderland parties were generally far bigger than their Russian comrades in this period; *Iskra* seemed to be calling for the subordination of their organizations into a weaker and somewhat distant Russian party. For instance, *Iskra* granted Bundists only five of the fifty-one votes at the RSDRP Second Congress, even though the Bund's membership was close to three times higher than the rest of the party combined. [36]

Uneven organizational strength was compounded by concerns that a Russian-led party might not as effectively defend the interests of non-Russian workers, particularly regarding national liberation. In these debates, organizational and political issues were always intertwined—borderland SDs' insistence on organizational autonomy was linked to what they saw as Iskra's limitations on the national question. Latvian SD Pēteris Stučka, who many years later became the leader of Latvian Bolshevism, challenged *Iskra*'s view that greater organizational centralization would always lead to greater political effectiveness. [37] This was not necessarily the case, Stučka argued, because the Russian SDs were "somewhat indifferent to the other nationalities in Russia" and did not often have a good understanding of the particularities of the borderlands. [38]

Without absolutely precluding the All-Russian organizational centralism desired by *Iskra*, Stučka argued that a federalist approach was the most appropriate step towards closer unity at that moment in time:

*"We do not know enough about the organizations of other nationalities. Naturally, this explains our hesitancy towards a merger on the basis of centralization. Amalgamation, to discard everything that we have established through long struggle, to transfer all deciding powers to the hands of a foreign Central Committee in which we have no voice (our votes will disappear among the large number of other votes) is and will be hard for us. It would be easier for us to join on a basis that would allow us self-government, and to set up a Central Committee where we had some say and whose power over us would be limited. . . . The first step we take towards unity must not be a leap into an unknown sea."* [39]

In this context, the initial move towards a unified party required a federalist approach:

*"If Russia's proletarians of different nationalities were to unite in a federal party, this party would be the best opportunity for its constituents to get mutually acquainted and more and more move closer to each other. I am sure that even though a federal bond is weaker, it will be the best path towards a closer merger. The Central Committee will receive more and more trust and authority—but this time the authority will be given voluntarily and with full trust. Only then will there grow a strong Russian Social Democratic Party, which will merge the conscious proletarians of all Russia's nationalities into a united struggle for a single goal."* [40]

Stučka concluded that it would not be possible to free Russia as a whole without the participation of non-Russians. [41]

Widespread opposition to a centralized empire-wide party placed Iskra in a bind. Knowing that other non-Russian SDs also supported a federalist approach, the Bund proposed that the upcoming 1903 Second Congress of the RSDRP invite all Marxist parties of the empire—Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, etc.—to join and participate. Without the borderland SDs, the Bund argued, *Iskra* could only build a Russian party, not an All-Russian party. [42] But Iskraists knew that their centralizing plans would not be accepted by such a broader congress. While expressing a desire that all nationalities eventually be included in the RSDRP, Lenin and Iskra nevertheless rejected the Bund's proposal:

*"By formally advancing the "right" of "all" nationalities to found the long-ago-founded Russian*

*Social-Democratic Labor Party, the Bund manifestly confirms that it is precisely over the question of the notorious “federation” that it has raised the whole issue. . . . We cannot but favor representation of “all” nationalities at the congress, but at the same time we must remember that we can think of expanding the nucleus or allying it with other organizations only after the formation of this nucleus has been completed (or, at the very least, after there is no doubt about its stability).”* [43]

This was a sensible approach to consolidating Iskra’s organizational project, but it raises serious questions about the representativity of the RSDRP as an All-Russian party. Given Iskra’s weakness in the borderlands, one has to wonder whether there were viable alternatives to declaring that a primarily Russian party represented the whole proletariat in the state. Without renouncing their organizational goals, Iskraists could have accepted party federalism with the borderland SDs as a first step towards closer organizational unity or they could have worked as a current within the existing borderland parties. Had Iskra adopted a more flexible organizational approach, its efforts to root itself in non-Russian regions and to build empire-wide proletarian unity may have been more effective. [44]

The axiom of “one centralized party for one state” made sense in nation-states like France; whether it was appropriate for an expansive multinational empire like tsarist Russia is questionable. Similar debates would later arise in Ireland, Algeria, and beyond, as Marxists from oppressed nations demanded organizational independence from their comrades in the metropolises. [45]

### **Fighting oppression**

Evaluating the pushback of borderland SDs against All-Russian party centralism is inextricable from an assessment of Russian Marxists’ general politics on national liberation in this period. On the one hand, Iskra explicitly and consistently supported legal equality for all and opposed the tsarist government’s Russification policies. Lenin wrote in 1903:

*“Since the state arena in which we are working today was created and is being maintained and extended by means of a series of outrageous acts of violence, then, to make the struggle against all forms of exploitation and oppression successful, we must not disperse but unite the forces of the working class, which is the most oppressed and the most capable of fighting. The demand for recognition of every nationality’s right to self-determination simply implies that we, the party of the proletariat, must always and unconditionally oppose any attempt to influence national self-determination from without by violence or injustice.”* [46]

On the other hand, the national question was not a major focus of the Iskraists. Based in relatively ethnically-homogeneous Central Russia and the Russified cities of Ukraine, and organizing primarily Russian and Russified workers and students, Iskraists generally operated in milieus where national liberation was seen as a marginal issue. Lenin did not write his first theoretical examination of the national question until 1913—two decades after the start of his political career. His initial draft programs for the party in the 1890s did not discuss the national question and did not go beyond calling for legal equality. [47] Illustrative of this neglect is Lenin’s famous 1902 pamphlet *What is to Be Done?*, which basically ignores the domination of non-Russians. [48] Ironically, the following quote is often cited today as evidence of Lenin’s longstanding fight against all forms of oppression: “The Social-Democrat’s ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but the tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects.” [49]

This important formulation was largely a reiteration of the 1891 German Marxist Erfurt Program’s declaration that Social Democrats fought against “not only the exploitation and oppression of wage



earners, but any form of exploitation and oppression, whether directed against a class, party, sex, or race.” [50] But the discussion on this question in *What Is To Be Done?* did not address oppressed nationalities (or women). By my rough count, the number of article references to non-proletarian domination and struggle in tsarist Russia breaks down as follows: liberals and *zemstvo* (local government) activists: 16; students: 16; peasants: 8; religious sects: 5; soldiers: 3; non-Russian nationalities: 0. This omission of the autocracy’s domination of borderland peoples is particularly problematic given that a core argument of *What Is To Be Done?* is the need for an “All-Russian” (i.e., empire-wide) newspaper and party. One could easily get the impression from Lenin’s pamphlet that tsarist Russia was a homogenous nation-state rather than a multinational empire. At no point does *What Is to Be Done?* address how *Iskra*, a Russian-language newspaper, could feasibly act as the empire-wide “collective organizer” for a polity in which the native language of most people was not Russian.

In 1903, Lenin wrote his first string of pieces on the national question. Polemics mostly against the Bund and the PPS, these short articles focused on the salient point that Marxists opposed national oppression and that only the united struggle of workers of all nationalities could end it. Nevertheless, key aspects of Lenin’s later national liberation strategy were absent, including a focus on fighting “great nation” chauvinism; a stress on the distinction between oppressor and oppressed peoples; critical support for the nationalism of dominated peoples; advocacy of national autonomy or federalism; a conception of the anti-imperialist united front; and a view of national movements as central to the fight for socialism.

Despite the political limitations of these articles, it is significant that *Iskra*’s main writer on this topic was Lenin—in both this formative period and later years he proved to be more aware of the national question than most of the rest of the Russian party. Even N. N. Popov’s 1934 Stalinist *Outline History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* acknowledged that in these early years “the local party organizations had hitherto not paid the national question the attention it deserved, and as a consequence were not always able to counteract successfully the influence of the bourgeois nationalists who made great capital out of their national demands among the workers and toilers of the oppressed nationalities.” [51] Two Bolshevik leaders similarly recalled that, “The issue was not even that we were not fond of the slogans of autonomy, federation, and independence, and that we advocated ‘unity.’ The issue is that we completely avoided the national liberation movement.” [52]

Nationally conscious socialists in the periphery of the empire generally joined the non-Russian organizations. Ethnic Russians in these regions mostly joined the “All-Russian” parties, as did most Russified militants, who as Lenin noted “over-do this Russian frame of mind.” [53] This factional pattern, coupled with the fact that Russian chauvinism and nationalism tended to be strongest among Russians in the borderlands, helps explain why the most anti-national wing of the Bolsheviks was generally based in the empire’s periphery. [54] Particularly after 1914, this gap between Lenin’s approach and those of his comrades on the ground became a major source of internal conflict within Bolshevism. Historian Jeremy Smith notes that the history of Bolshevik national policy between 1917 and 1923 is “largely the story of a struggle between the center and the periphery in which it was, perhaps surprisingly, the center which supported local autonomy.” [55]

Given that the national question was a much more pressing issue in the borderlands than in Central Russia, it is not surprising that the fight against national oppression was led by socialists from the dominated nationalities themselves. For example, after pogroms began to proliferate from 1902 onwards, Bundist self-defense squads spread across the Pale. To fight the pogromists, Jewish workers and students organized themselves into groups of “tens,” armed with an assortment of knives, clubs, axes, bombs, revolvers, and meat cleavers. Maxim Gorky, the well-known Russian SD author, noted: “It is hard to imagine the extent to which the face of the Jewish community has been changed under the influence of the revolutionary activity of the Bund, and to what extent the

attitude of Christians towards Jews has also changed because of this. . . . The exceptional heroism of Jews in their revolutionary struggle is known by all.” [56]

One socialist critic has recently argued that the Bund “took it for granted from its very inception that the task of fighting anti-Semitism was that of the Jewish workers, rather than the working class as a whole.” [57] In reality, the Bund explicitly rejected this idea and criticized Zionists for advocating it. [58] After the anti-Jewish violence in Kishinev in April 1903, the Bund stressed the need to fight Zionist efforts to use the pogrom as a pretext to “foment discord between Jewish and Christian workers” and called for the joint struggle of workers of all nationalities. [59] This internationalist orientation was put into practice as Bundists actively involved non-Jewish workers and other SD organizations in the fight against anti-Semitism and the pogroms—the famous Gomel defense squad that fought off pogromists in August 1903, for instance, was multinational in composition. [60]

The early record of Russian revolutionaries was not stellar when it came to fighting anti-Jewish violence. In an infamous act that discredited Russian radicals for many years, leaders of the populist Narodnaia Volia had publicly praised the 1881 pogrom wave as the first step towards revolution: “You have begun to rebel against the Jews. You have done well. Soon the revolt will be taken across all of Russia against the Tsar, the pany [landowning gentry], the Jews.” [61]

Pavel Axelrod, an influential founder of Russian Marxism, was privately opposed to this statement’s anti-Semitic rhetoric, but he nevertheless failed to state so publicly. Rather, he publicly argued that the pogroms could have been transformed by socialists into an anti-tsarist rebellion, declaring in an 1881 article that the pogroms should have been “the beginning of a socialist class movement in the name of ‘land and freedom’ for the laboring masses. It was only necessary, in Kiev for example, to direct the crowd to the quarter of the Jewish capitalists, to the banks, where the capital of the upper classes of all nationalities is concentrated.” [62]

Socialist ambivalence towards defending Jews continued well into the 1890s. The 1891 congress of the Second International rejected a resolution to support equal rights for Jews. Instead, the congress resolved that it condemned both “anti-semitic and philo-semitic [pro-Jewish] agitation, which are, in the hands of the capitalists and the ruling classes, one of the means for diverting the socialist movement from the right path and introducing discord among the workers.” [63] In the early 1890s, Russian SDs in Odessa banned Jews from membership in order not to estrange anti-Semitic Russian workers. [64] Lenin noted Plekhanov’s prejudiced comments about the Bund at a 1900 conference of the Emancipation of Labor group (the precursor to *Iskra*):

*“Plekhanov displayed extreme intolerance and openly declared it to be an organization of exploiters who exploit the Russians and not a Social-Democratic organization. He said that our aim was to eject this Bund from the Party, that the Jews are all chauvinists and nationalists, that a Russian party should be Russian and should not render itself into “captivity” to the “brood of vipers,” etc. None of our objections to these indecent speeches had any result and Plekhanov stuck to his ideas to the full, saying that we simply did not know enough about the Jews, that we had no real experience in dealing with Jews.”* [65]

By 1903, however, Russian Marxists were firmly committed to fighting anti-Jewish violence. Iskraists explicitly opposed the tsar’s persecution of non-Russian nationalities and sought to establish a democratic republic that would guarantee equal rights for all citizens. In May 1903, *Iskra* published an article by Plekhanov criticizing the conduct of *Narodnaia Volia* in 1881 and calling for a resolute struggle against anti-Semitic pogroms. [66] The RSDRP Second Congress passed a resolution along these lines. [67]

This position marked a major shift away from the hesitations of earlier generations of socialists. Yet various aspects of the Russian socialist response remained problematic. In a polemic against the Bund following the 1902 pogrom in Częstochowa (tsarist Poland), Lenin claimed it was “infantile” for the Bund to assert that “anti-Semitism has struck roots in the mass of the workers.” [68] Lenin’s argument—that anti-Semitism corresponded to the interests of the bourgeoisie not the proletariat—basically elided the issue raised by the Bund. [69]

Bundists criticized *Iskra* for prioritizing the fight against Jewish particularism over the fight against anti-Semitism: “The Russian committees are more interested in the enlightenment of the Jewish masses and their liberation from prejudices . . . than the eradication of savage anti-Semitism . . . there is no doubt that from a revolutionary point of view, this is a large negligence.” [70] *Iskra*’s article in response to this charge affirmed its steadfast opposition to the pogroms and anti-Semitism, but also argued that Jewish nationalism was in fact a “much more threatening development for the class organization of the proletariat than anti-Semitism.” [71] The latter could only lead “completely culturally and politically dark [backwards] elements” of the population, *Iskra* argued, while the former was winning over “cultured layers of the Jewish proletariat.” [72] *Iskra* concluded that “we cannot abandon the task of combating the ‘prejudices of the Jewish masses.’” [73]

Most borderland SDs rejected this emphasis on fighting the nationalism of the oppressed more than the nationalism of the oppressor. One PPS leader put forward the following as a strategic alternative: “If he [the socialist] is a Jew, let him fight Zionism in words and deeds. If he is a Christian, let him combat anti-Semitism in agitation and by personal example.” [74]

To their credit, during both the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, Russian Marxists, usually in alliance with the Bund, proved to be consistent fighters against the pogromists. Any lingering hesitations dissipated as tsarist officials and reactionary forces sought to direct anti-Semitic violence against the entire revolutionary movement, which they claimed was led and controlled by Jews—in this context, combatting pogroms became a necessity of self-defense for the socialist movement as a whole.

### Assimilationism and national culture

A major point of contention between borderland SDs and *Iskra* concerned the issue of assimilation and national culture. Arguments in favor of assimilationism could certainly find considerable theoretical justification in the Marxist canon. During the 1848 revolution, Marx and Engels had distinguished between “non-historical nations” such as Ukrainians and Czechs that were fated by history to disappear and “historical nations” like Germany or Poland that would solidify in the modern world. [75] Ethnic absorption into society at large was widely seen as a progressive act eliminating outdated divisions. This merging process would have to be voluntary, as forced state assimilation would be both oppressive and ultimately counterproductive.

It was with this theoretical legacy that Russian Marxists favored the voluntary assimilation of non-Russians. [76] This was not merely a theoretical question about the distant future, but an immediate issue of political practice. For example, in a context marked by the tsarist prohibition of the Ukrainian language, Russian SDs played a central role in assimilating ethnic-Ukrainian workers in Ukraine’s cities, a practice that Ukrainian SDs noted was dangerously isolating the urban labor movement from the native Ukrainian countryside. [77] In 1900, the Ukrainian Socialist Party wrote that “as to the Russian socialists, we hope that certain Great Russian aims which make their appearance here and there will disappear with the blossoming of socialist consciousness.” [78] Yet as late as 1913 Lenin argued that “the historically progressive nature of the ‘assimilation’ of the Great-Russian and Ukrainian workers will be as undoubted as the progressive nature of the grinding

down of nations in America.” [79]

In light of the rise of the Ukrainian national struggle from 1917 onwards, and the chaos created for the Ukrainian revolution by the chasm between the Russified cities and the Ukrainian countryside, the problematic aspects of *Iskra*'s approach are evident. But it should be noted that Ukrainian national consciousness at the turn of the century was a marginal phenomenon largely limited to student circles. The mistake of the Iskraists was not so much Russian chauvinism, but rather a failure to foresee the possibility of an upsurge in Ukrainian national sentiment.

While *Iskra* tended to assume that national consciousness and national movements would get weaker as capitalist development and proletarian struggle advanced, other Marxist currents believed that that the opposite would prove to be the case. Kelles-Krauz of the PPS argued in 1899 for the relevance of the fight for Ukrainian independence on the following grounds: “Economic evolution and the class struggle will give rise to—or revive—national sentiment, above all to the Ruthenians [Ukrainians], who will without a doubt create their own remarkable socialist movement.” [80] Seeing the emergence of proletarian-separatist movements in the borderlands as key to the overthrow of tsarism, the PPS supported the Ukrainian socialist movement and advocated an independent Ukraine. When the Iskraist theoretical journal *Zaria* declared that it would be “strange” to demand political autonomy for “Little Russians” (Ukrainians) because they “do not need it,” the PPS replied that this was a “matter whose decision must be unconditionally left to the concerned nationalities themselves.” [81]

The debate on assimilation above all revolved around “the Jewish question.” Lenin argued that the emancipation of Jews from feudalism and political oppression necessarily required their assimilation into society at large. [82] “Can we possibly attribute to chance the fact that it is the reactionary forces all over Europe, and especially in Russia, who oppose the assimilation of the Jews and try to perpetuate their isolation? That is precisely what the Jewish problem amounts to: assimilation or isolation?” he wrote. [83] According to *Iskra*'s conception, Jewish culture was exclusively the expression of religious backwardness and segregation from European civilization. Lyubov Axelrod, for instance, bluntly declared in *Iskra* that:

*“Jews will only fully join European culture when they finally part ways with their national beliefs, in other words, when they assimilate. . . . We do not consider the Jewish jargon [Yiddish] to be a cultural language. . . . Knowledge of the Russian language provides a full opportunity to become acquainted with the main results of culture, while knowledge of the Jewish jargon does not. . . . That is why we, Social Democrats, condemn the Jewish jargon.”* [84]

In 1904 Bundist leader Vladimir Medem sought to articulate a revolutionary Marxist alternative to assimilationism. Medem's theory of “neutralism” argued that it was contrary to the interests of the proletariat to either politically promote or oppose assimilation. His core argument was that,

*“If history condemns Jews to assimilate into other nations, we will not take steps to delay this process, nor to assist it. We are neutral. . . . We are not against assimilation, we are against assimilationism. If history brings the flowering of a distinctive Jewish culture . . . we are neutral.”* [85]

Most Bundists did not deny the possibility that the masses of Jewish people in Eastern Europe could eventually assimilate. But they projected this as a distant, and not necessarily inevitable, process. Polemicizing against the idea that the Jewish question would immediately disappear after the fall of the autocracy, one Bundist predicted that “the day after the political revolution, Jewish culture and literature will flourish. It is possible that the Jewish nation will later disappear, but in the first few years after the fall of the autocracy it will develop.” [86] Latvian SDs similarly opposed Russian

Marxists' assimilationism and accused them of being indifferent to national issues: "Forget about your nationality—[this is their] simple, easy and clever solution to the national question." [87] In contrast with Iskra, the PPS in this period dropped its initially assimilationist approach to Jews. [88]

Though assimilationism remained hegemonic among Russian SDs, an occasional dissident voice was raised. In late 1903, a long letter to the editor in *Iskra* by the author B-v challenged Lenin's stance on assimilation, on both theoretical and political grounds. In an October 1903 polemic with the Bund, Lenin had argued as follows:

*"Hostility towards non-native sections of the population can only be eliminated [quoting German SPD theoretician Karl Kautsky] "when the non-native sections of the population cease to be alien and blend with the general mass of the population. **That is the only possible solution of the Jewish problem, and we should support everything that makes for the ending of Jewish isolation."** Yet the Bund is resisting this only possible solution."* [89]

B-v criticized this for implying that hatred to Jews was an inevitable and natural response to Jewish "alienness"—a type of reasoning shared by anti-Semites. [90] Moreover, B-v continued, if discrimination could only be eliminated through assimilation then this granted anti-Semitism "if not immortality, then at least a very, very long existence." [91] An alternative approach existed: eliminating anti-Semitism among the Christian masses through uniting with Jewish workers in the class struggle. [92]

To build this proletarian unity, B-v argued, it was politically wrong to substitute the slogan "Proletarians of the world unite!" with that of "Jewish proletarians: Assimilate!" [93] Such an approach reflected a dismissive attitude towards the existing Jewish culture and language. [94] Observable trends in the national question, the author noted, did not prove whether or not Jews would inevitably assimilate. As such, it was wrong to draw political conclusions for today from speculations about the future. [95]

This critique was closer in some respects to Kautsky's actual position than Lenin's article. The citation of Kautsky in Lenin's article was distorted by mistranslation and omission. According to Lenin, Kautsky had argued that the only solution to Jewish question was assimilation; but in fact Kautsky had argued that while this was the only ultimate solution, in the interim it was necessary to inculcate the masses against anti-Semitism through education. Kautsky's actual wording was the following:

*"How can this hostility be overcome? **Most radically** in as such as those parts of the population that bear the alien character stop being alien and mix with the whole of the population. This is **ultimately** the only possible solution of the Jewish question, and everything that ends Jewish isolation should be supported. But Jewish particularism is the product of thousands of years of development, they cannot be assimilated all of a sudden into the whole of the remaining population. **As long as this has not happened, there is only one way to counter the aversion to Jewish particularism: the education of the masses.**"* [96]

The political content of this citation discrepancy is underlined by the fact that, unlike Kautsky, Lenin at no point in his piece mentions the need to fight anti-Semitism. Far more than Kautsky, Lenin's article placed the burden for resolving the Jewish question on Jews themselves. Of course, Lenin was certainly opposed to anti-Semitism; this text was a polemic and its emphasis reflected a heated factional fight with the Bund. Nevertheless, the piece seemed to validate the charge that *Iskra* was insufficiently oriented to fighting anti-Semitism.

Further limitations in Iskra's approach to the national question were illustrated in the debate on



language equality at the 1903 RSDRP Second Congress. While Lenin, Trotsky, and Julius Martov supported “equality for all citizens,” they opposed the Bund’s proposal, seconded by the Caucasian SDs, to explicitly include “equality of languages” in the party program. This proposal was met with laughter and a long controversy ensued, pitting Iskraists against borderland SDs and the non-*Iskra* center. Pointing to the case of Poles in Germany, Bundists argued that equal legal rights for all citizens would not necessarily mean that their language would be recognized as equal in state institutions. [97] Only after multiple tied votes (and Iskraist attempts to postpone taking any decision) was a plank on language rights eventually included. Yet the final 1903 RSDRP resolution also included recognition of a “state language,” a position criticized by various borderland SDs for implying continued Russian hegemony in the democratic regime envisioned by the RSDRP. [98]

It was on the question of national culture that the Bolsheviks’ most radical reversed their orientation after the October Revolution. The new Soviet regime eventually not only dropped all assimilationist orientations and practices, it went far beyond simply granting equality to all citizens: from 1921 onwards it actively promoted the consolidation and expansion of national languages, cultures, and autonomous institutions for all non-Russians, including for both Jews and Ukrainians. Smith notes that “the policy of the Bolsheviks was now, by means of territorial autonomy, ethnic consolidation, education, linguistic and cultural development, and the recruitment of national communists, to promote the nation as a focus for the overall development of the non-Russians to the ‘higher stage’ of socialism.” [99]

### **State federalism and autonomy**

*Iskra* called for a single centralized republic for the whole territory and generally opposed governmental federalism and national autonomy. Arguing that the demand for a centralized state was best suited for uniting workers across national divisions, Lenin wrote:

*“It is not the business of the proletariat to preach federalism and national autonomy; it is not the business of the proletariat to advance such demands, which inevitably amount to a demand for the establishment of an autonomous class state. It is the business of the proletariat to rally the greatest possible masses of workers of each and every nationality more closely, to rally them for struggle in the broadest possible arena for a democratic republic and for socialism.”* [100]

In hindsight, Iskraists underestimated the implications of organizing in an empire, rather than a nation-state. Partly this reflected unconscious assumptions about the cohesive nature of “Russia,” which were shared widely in Russian society across the political spectrum. Nowhere was the Russian SD’s unintentional absorption of these views more clear than in Ukraine. Bolshevik leaders later noted that “we in fact gave no answer to the Ukrainian question because we did not know of it, as we considered it only a ‘petty bourgeois whim’ . . . for us there was no Ukraine, only ‘South Russia.’” [101]

*Iskra*’s approach also reflected an overestimation of the tendency of capitalism to socially, politically, and culturally integrate the different nationalities of tsarist Russia. According to Lenin, the “disintegration of Russia” called for by the PPS “is and will remain an empty phrase, as long as economic development continues to bring the different parts of a political whole more and more closely together.” [102] In response, the PPS accused him of echoing Luxemburg’s perspective. [103] Reflecting on the reasons why the Bolsheviks eventually reversed their stance on state federalism in 1918, Stalin noted that “the national movement proved to be far more weighty a factor, and the process of amalgamation of nations far more complicated a matter than might have appeared formerly, in the period prior to the war, or in the period prior to the October

Revolution.” [104]

The “orthodox” Marxist precedent for federalism was established when the Austrian Social Democracy’s 1899 Brünn congress adopted a watershed national program on the basis of Kautsky’s stance. Austria-Hungary, the Brünn resolution stated, should be transformed into a “democratic federal state of nationalities.” [105] The Brünn resolution denounced “bureaucratic state-centralism” as it was an obstacle for “the cultivation and development of the national specificity of all peoples.” [106]

Most non-Russian Marxist parties advocated different forms of broad national autonomy or federalism. “Freedom and democracy in Russia are inconceivable without free peoples linked to each other solely through mutual alliances that are freely entered into. Russia must be proclaimed as an association of free democratic republics,” argued the Latvian LSS. [107] The Ukrainian Social Democratic Workers Party similarly demanded broad autonomy for Ukraine in a federal Russia. Opposing proposals to limit autonomy to administrative or cultural questions, it proposed a vision of national autonomy concretized in a legislative Sejm (parliament) with the power to control financial, agrarian, economic, educational, and cultural affairs. [108]

Bundists developed their own particular case for national federalism. They argued that the establishment of political freedom and legal equality would not necessarily end the oppression of minority groups. [109] Without collective rights and institutions for all peoples, national minorities would be subjected to de facto coerced assimilation, manifest in the inevitable pressures to adopt the culture of the majority. [110] Therefore individual legal equality was inadequate and had to be supplemented by autonomous governmental cultural institutions for all nationalities irrespective of the territory in which they lived—national-cultural autonomy (NCA).

Essentially the Bund advocated a form of what is now called “multiculturalism”—though, as a Marxist organization, it did not promote “diversity” or “national culture” as goals in themselves. Medem argued that “national identity itself is not important . . . we look at things from the point of view of expediency for the proletariat.” [111] According to Bundists, NCA could not eliminate national oppression, as this goal was achievable only through the overthrow of capitalism. [112] Its essential purpose was to sufficiently minimize national oppression and ethnic tensions so that workers of all nationalities could more effectively unite and fight against their class enemies. [113]

A significant aspect of the Bund’s initial orientation was its support for combining nonterritorial and territorial national solutions. [114] On the crucial question of Polish independence, the position of Bundists in this period was identical to that of Lenin: unity of all workers against tsarism, combined with recognizing the right of Poles to secede, but not advocating secession. [115] At the 1903 RSDRP congress, the Bund in fact promoted more extensive territorial sovereignty for non-Russians than Lenin—it was a Bundist who proposed the demand for “regional self-government,” which Lenin opposed as it could give the impression that “Social-Democrats wanted to split the whole state up into small regions.” [116]

There were almost no serious theoretical critiques of NCA in this period—the major Marxist debates on this topic only came after the 1907 publication of “Austro-Marxist” Otto Bauer’s *The Nationalities Question and Social Democracy*, a historical-materialist examination of the rise of nations that argued for NCA in the Austro-Hungarian empire. One noteworthy exception was a 1903 analysis by Kelles-Krauz, which presaged (and arguably politically surpassed) the well-known 1913 polemics against NCA by Lenin and Joseph Stalin.

Kelles-Krauz focused his fire not on the Bund, but rather Austrian NCA advocate Karl Renner, whom he accused of reformism and a German-patriotic defense of the existing Austrian imperial state.

Comparing Renner's perspective to that of Rosa Luxemburg, he noted that both failed to foresee the potential for a progressive emergence of political separatism and the revolutionary break-up of the imperial state. [117] Renner's proposal to limit the scope of national autonomy to cultural issues offered too little actual power to dominated peoples. Kelles-Krauz praised the Brünn program's proposal for territorial autonomy, though he argued that to be fully consistent with democratic and revolutionary principles the Austrian party should explicitly recognize the right of these autonomous nations to secede. [Ibid., 214.]

In contrast with the later works of Lenin and Stalin, Kelles-Krauz did not entirely dismiss the relevancy of NCA. While it was too limited for territorial nations, he argued that it made sense for "dispersed minority nationalities." [118] Cultural autonomy, he noted, corresponded well to the needs of Jews, as territorial solutions were precluded by their geographic dispersion. [119] Kelles-Krauz concluded that, if so wished by Jews, an independent Poland would grant them "full national rights and corporate autonomy," manifest in autonomous schools and cultural institutions. [120]

Kelles-Krauz's analysis of NCA stands out for at least two reasons. The first concerns the question of secession. A commonality of Renner, Kautsky, Luxemburg, Austrian SDs, Bundists, and Iskraists was their explicit desire to maintain a single state for the entire imperial territory in Austria or Russia. Their differences concerned the form of such a state and whether one should recognize the right of nations to secede from it. In contrast, Kelles-Krauz, like the PPS as a whole, rejected the desirability of maintaining these big states. As such, his critique of Renner was more forceful than the later Bolshevik stance, which combined advocacy of a centralized republic for the whole territory of the empire with recognition of the right of secession.

The second significant element of Kelles-Krauz's piece was that, by arguing for the relevance of NCA for Jews, it showed that territorial and non-territorial solutions to the national question were not mutually exclusive. Lenin and Stalin's later focus on counterposing these two approaches was neither absolutely necessary nor particularly "orthodox."

When in 1905 Karl Kautsky finally published a piece on Russia's national question, he argued that given the "strong urge for independence" demonstrated by non-Russians in the tsarist empire, the only way to avoid the complete secession of these oppressed nationalities was for a democratic Russia to be transformed into "a federal state, the 'United States of Russia.'" [121] He cautioned that such a territorial solution could not resolve national oppression on its own, as it did not address the national minorities on these lands. [122] In Russia—like in Austria, the Balkans, and Asia Minor—it was common for multiple peoples to live interspersed on a given territory, "resulting in national questions that are incomprehensible for a Western European and unsolvable through Western European means." [123]

Given this particular dilemma, Kautsky put forward the perspective of the SDs in Austria as a plausible solution for Russia, arguing that "a series of useful proposals have been made in Austria to combine the self-administration of regions with the self-administration of each nation, and in the Austrian social democratic party the two forms of autonomy are in practice implemented side by side with each other." [124] Kautsky's article was published in Russian by the Bund, which justifiably saw it as a vindication of its perspective.

## Conclusion

After 1905, Russian Marxists began rethinking their approach to national liberation and eventually adopted many of the positions first articulated by borderland SDs. The Bolshevik leadership's first evolution came during 1913-14. Partly a reaction to an upturn in national movements during and

following the 1905 revolution, this shift was in its most immediate sense a response to factional struggles culminating in the Bolsheviks' definitive organizational break from the "Menshevik-liquidators" in 1912. As the Bolsheviks found themselves with little support among non-Russian workers, and as they were accused by their factional opponents, of indifference to national liberation, Lenin and Stalin responded by publishing extensive polemical treatises on the national question. Similarly, the 1913 Bolshevik conference for the first time resolved to support regional autonomy, explicitly recognize the right to secede, and reject Russian as the official state language. [125]

A more fundamental change in Lenin's strategy came after 1914. Following the capitulation of Second International leaders across Europe to their ruling classes' nationalist war drives, and as part of his new analysis of imperialism, Lenin now argued that capitalism increased rather than diminished national divisions, and he now stressed the centrality of national liberation movements in the fight for world socialism. [126]

But Lenin's innovations on the national question were for years met with hostility or indifference by Bolshevik militants, particularly those in the borderlands; much of the latter's writings during World War I are polemics against the Luxemburgism of his own comrades in Ukraine and Poland. [127] Yurii Lapchynsky, a Bolshevik leader in Ukraine, later recalled that "it seemed to us then that the question of nationalities only made the task more complicated, only distracted the workers' attention from the main issue: from the revolutionary work . . . the attitude of most of us to the national cause was as to one that did not concern us, the revolutionary workers." [128]

In and after the 1917 revolution, which witnessed an explosive rise of national movements in the borderlands, Bolshevik national policies reflected this bifurcation. Lenin and most top Bolshevik leaders, seeing the urgency of winning the support of non-Russian peoples, deepened their support for national demands, for example by adopting state federalism in 1917-18. [129] Just as important, the Communist International raised the banner of anti-colonialism and the anti-imperialist united front across the globe. [130]

Yet in the non-Russian regions of the empire, Bolshevism continued to resemble Luxemburgism and Iskraism more than the new orientation proposed by Lenin and the Communist International. "In the Russian-dominated Soviets in the [borderland] regions it was Great Russian attitudes which prevailed, and they frequently clashed with the representatives of the local population," observes Smith. [131] This relative indifference to national liberation, though certainly not the sole factor determining the revolution's course in the borderlands, had catastrophic consequences for the spread of the socialist revolution to the empire's periphery. Noting the prevalence of "Great Russian" chauvinism within Communist ranks during these years, N. N. Popov writes that "this attitude towards the national question, veiled by leftist phrases, did tremendous harm to the party and was of no less tremendous benefit to the forces of counter-revolution, which took every opportunity of playing upon the nationalist feeling to be met with among the formerly oppressed peoples." [132]

Various factors contributed to the Bolsheviks' reorientation after 1920, as new soviet governments were established in Ukraine and the Caucasus, largely through Red Army intervention. First, the Bolshevik party during these years received an influx of borderland SDs committed to furthering national liberation within the framework of the soviet state. Second, after the initial chaos of the civil war diminished somewhat, the Bolshevik center began to more effectively push back against the Luxemburgism of its party ranks. Third, and most important, the 1917-20 defeats of the revolution in the empire's periphery led to a significant rethinking of the national question among the party as a whole. The result was an ambitious project of non-Russian national development, centered on the promotion of non-Russian cultures and languages, governmental federalism, and the incorporation of

borderland socialists into top leadership posts. [133]

How much political sovereignty should be delegated to the national republics remained a major debate within the party, as was manifest during Lenin's famous 1922-23 "last struggle" against bureaucratic-centralistic impositions on Georgia by Georgian Bolsheviks Joseph Stalin and Sergo Ordzhonikidze, in alliance with Polish Bolshevik Felix Dzerzhinsk. [134] Whatever their limitations, the government's new "indigenization" policies on the whole fostered a profound "national renaissance" in the borderlands that lasted until the Stalinist counterrevolution of the 1930s.

In short, Lenin and the Bolsheviks' approach to national liberation evolved through political practice over many years. Their ability to flexibly absorb and articulate the lessons from this period of revolutionary upheaval remains a vital political foundation for the international Marxist movement. But there is no need to gloss over the difficulties and defeats it took for them to overcome the limitations of Iskraism. Today, like a century ago, learning from experience and missteps in struggle remains an indispensable component of effective revolutionary socialist politics.

### **Eric Blanc**

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### **P.S.**

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<http://isreview.org/issue/100/anti-imperial-marxism>

<https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2016/04/06/anti-imperial-marxism-borderland-socialists-and-the-evolution-of-bolshevism-on-national-liberation/>

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### **Footnotes**

[1] A more comprehensive account would also necessarily examine how positions on the national question were rooted in the distinct social contexts of the empire, as well as the parties' broader strategic conceptions of the "driving forces" of the revolution, tactics towards the workers' movement, and relations with the peasant struggle. These topics are addressed in my forthcoming monograph, *Anti-Colonial Marxism: Oppression & Revolution in the Tsarist Borderlands* (Brill—Historical Materialism Book Series).

[2] One exception was the Finnish Social Democratic Party, whose moderate policies in these years reflected the fact that, unlike all the other SD organizations in the empire, it was a legalized party. This legal status was made possible by the considerable political freedom and national autonomy granted to Finland by the tsarist regime

[3] Cited in Helene Dopkewitsch, *Die entwicklung des lettländischen Staatsgedankens bis 1918* (Berlin: H.R. Engelmann, 1936), 24-25.

[4] *Szkic programu Polskiej Partii Socjalistycznej*, (1892) in Feliks Tych, *Polskie programy*



socialistyczne 1878-1918 (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1975), 248, 252.

[5] "Sprawozdanie z obrad i uchwały IV zjazdu P.P.S. (w Warszawie)," (1897) in Aleksander Malinowski, ed., *Materyały do historii P.P.S. i ruchu rewolucyjnego w zaborze rosyjskim od r. 1893-1904. tom I, rok 1893-1897* (Warszawa: Odbito w drukarni narodowej w Krakowie, 1907), 301.

[6] "Wyjaśnienie," *Robotnik*, November 30, 1894.

[7] "Szkic programu Polskiej Partii Socjalistycznej," 251.

[8] For recent charges of PPS "nationalism" see, for example, Liliana Riga, *The Bolsheviks and the Russian Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 117.

[9] On the relations of the SRs and the PPS, see the discussion in Antti Kujala, *Vallankumous ja kansallinen itseääräämis-oikeus: venäjän sosialistiset puolueet ja suomalainen radikalismi vuosisadan alussa* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1989)

[10] Jan Sobczak, *Współpraca SDKPiL z SDPRR: 1893-1907: geneza zjednoczenia i stanowisko SDKPiL wewnątrz SDPRR* (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1980), 386.

[11] On the December events in Poland, see Eugeniusz Przybyszewski, "Proletariat w ruchu rewolucyjnym w Polsce" (1930) in *Pisma* (Warszawa, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1961), 477-90.

[12] On these developments, see Janina Kasprzakowa, *Ideologia i polityka PPS-Lewicy w latach 1907-1914* (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1965).

[13] Cited in Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 255.

[14] "Воззвание ЦК бунда к еврейской интеллигенции," (1901) in К.М. Андерсон et al., eds., *Бунд: документы и материалы, 1894-1921* (Москва: РОССПЭН, 2010), 154.

[15] Владимир Медем, *Социал-демократия и национальный вопрос* (Санкт-Петербург: Буссея, 1906), 18.

[16] Chaim Weizmann to Theodor Herzl, May 6, 1903, in *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann, Vol. II, Series A*, edited by Barnet Litvinoff (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 305, 307.

[17] Brūno Kalnin, š, *Latvijas sociāldemokratijas piecdesmit gadi* (Stokholmā: LSDSP Ārzemju Komitejas Izdevuma, 1956), 39; P. Dauge, *P. Stučkas dzīve un darbs* (Rīgā: Latvijas Valsts Izdevniecība, 1958), 196.

[18] *Российская социал-демократическая рабочая партия, Четвертый (объединительный) съезд РСДРП, апрель-май 1906 года: протоколы* (Москва: Государственное Издательство Политической Литературы, 1959), 422-56

[19] Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz (Anon.), "Les Motifs de Notre Programme," *Bulletin Officiel du Parti Socialiste Polonais* 9 (1896), 3.

[20] Miķelis Valters (Anon.), "Baltijas sociālās demokrātijas jautājumi," *Revolucionārā baltija* 2 (1905): 23-24.

[21] *Ibid.*, 18.

[22] *Ibid.*, 20. My emphasis.

[23] V. I. Lenin, "Does the Jewish Proletariat Need an 'Independent Political Party'?" (1903) *Collected Works*, Vol. 6 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977—same publisher information for all subsequent Lenin volumes cited), 333.

[24] The only partial exception was the Georgian SDs, who joined the RSDRP in 1903. Though their organization was formally subordinate to the RSDRP leadership, in practice the Georgian SDs from 1905 onwards acted as a "party within the party" that implemented its own line on crucial issues such as agrarian struggle, party organization, terrorism, and the Duma. See Stephen F. Jones, *Socialism in Georgian Colors: The European Road to Social Democracy, 1883-1917* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[25] "J. Marchlewski do Członków Komitetu Zagranicznego SDKPiL," (1903) in Feliks Tych, ed., *Socjaldemokracja królestwa polskiego i litwy: materiały i dokumenty, tom II, 1902-1903* (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1962), 457.

[26] For a discussion of *kustarnichestvo*, and Iskra's party-building plan, see Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is To Be Done? In Context* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006).

[27] V. I. Lenin, "Letter to a Comrade on Our Organizational Tasks," (1902) *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, 248.

Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, 1903, *Second Ordinary Congress of the RSDLP: Complete Text of the Minutes*, translated by Brian Pearce (London: New Park Publications, 1978), 199.

[28] *Russian Social Democratic Labor Party Minutes*, 356.

[29] Л. Мартов, "Единая русская социал демократия и интересы еврейского пролетариата," *Искра*, 15 March 1903.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] Lenin, "The National Question in Our Programme," (1903) *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, 460.

[32] Kujala, 83.

[33] Nathan Weinstock, *Le Pain de Misère: Histoire du Mouvement Ouvrier Juif en Europe Tome I. L'Empire Russe Jusqu'en 1914* (Paris: La Découverte, 1984), 114-16, 120-24.

[34] *Ibid.*, 179.

[35] "Листовка пограничного комитета бунда 22 (9) сентября 1903 г.," (1903) in Андерсон, 369.

[36] Андерсон, 8.

- [37] Pēteris Stučka (Anon.) "Vienība vai federācija," *Sociāldemokrāts* 27 (1904), 5.
- [38] Ibid.
- [39] Ibid.8
- [40] Ibid., 7.
- [41] Ibid., 8.
- [42] Harold Shukman, *The Relations Between the Jewish Bund and the RSDRP, 1897-1903* (Ph.D. diss., Oxford University, 1961), 120.
- [43] Lenin, "Concerning the Statement of the Bund," (1903) *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, 322-23.
- [44] At the 1906 RSDRP congress, both the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks dropped their insistence on strict empire-wide centralization, allowing for the entry of the Bund, the Latvian SDs, and the Polish SDs into the RSDRP on a de facto federalist basis. After 1912, in the wake of their organizational break with the Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks reversed this tacit acceptance of party federalism, as they sought to organizationally coalesce the RSDRP around their faction.
- [45] See Mike Milotte, *Communism in Modern Ireland: the Pursuit of the Workers' Republic since 1916* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1984) and Allison Drew, *We Are No Longer in France: Communists in Colonial Algeria* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2014).
- [46] Lenin, "On the Manifesto of the League of the Armenian Social-Democrats," (1903) *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, 326-27. This article's vague formulation of "the right to self-determination" should be noted. In a follow-up 1903 article in *Iskra*, Lenin wrote that "self-determination" meant the right to form an independent state, but the 1903 RSDRP congress resolution left it undefined. Only in 1913 did the Bolsheviks officially define it in their program as "the right to secede."
- [47] Lenin, "Draft and Explanation of a Program for the Social-Democratic Party," (1895) *Collected Works*, Vol. 2; Lenin, "A Draft Program of Our Party," (1899) *Collected Works*, Vol. 4.
- [48] There is only one brief reference in the text to national oppression, made in passing in a section dedicated to the need to build an All-Russian (rather than local) Marxist newspaper: Lenin notes that "the Party that fights against all economic, political, social, and national oppression, can and must find, gather, train, mobilize, and set into motion such an army of omniscient people." Lenin, "What Is To Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement," (1902) *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, 488.
- [49] Lenin, "What Is To Be Done?" 423.
- [50] Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitagés der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands. Abgehalten zu Erfurt vom 14. bis 20. Oktober 1891* (Berlin: Verlag des "Vorwärts" Berliner Volksblatt Th. Glocke, 1891), 4.
- [51] N. N. Popov, *Outline History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (New York, International Publishers, 1934), Vol. 1, 285.
- [52] Сергій Мазлах and Василь Шахрай, *До хвилі* (1919) (Нью-Йорк: Пролог, 1969), 165.

[53] Lenin, "The Question of Nationalities or "Autonomisation,"" (1922) *Collected Works*, Vol. 36, 606. On the social-ethnic roots of the political affiliations of socialists under tsarism, see Robert J. Brym, *The Jewish Intelligentsia and Russian Marxism: a Sociological Study of Intellectual Radicalism and Ideological Divergence* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978) and Riga 2012.

[54] On the centrality of the borderlands for Russian nationalism, see, for example, Faith Hillis, *Children of Rus': Right-Bank Ukraine and the Invention of a Russian Nation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

[55] Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-23* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 6.

[56] Cited in Weinstock, 214-15.

[57] Sai Englert, "The Jewish Labour Bund," *International Socialism* 135 (2012): 121.

[58] *Le Bounde: Volume III de "L'Internationale Ouvrière et Socialiste" Brochure N.2* (Gand: Société Coopérative "Volksdrukkerij," 1909), 55.

[59] "Отчет о V съезде бунда с проектами резолюций и устава бунда июнь-октябрь 1903 г.," (1903) in Андерсон, 338.

[60] Henry J. Tobias, *The Jewish Bund in Russia from its Origins to 1905* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 224, 229.

[61] Cited in Erich Haberer, *Jews and Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 212.

[62] Cited in Abraham Ascher, "Pavel Axelrod: A Conflict between Jewish Loyalty and Revolutionary Dedication," *The Russian Review* 24, 3 (1965): 253.

[63] *Russian Social Democratic Labour Party Minutes*, 503. Referred to hereafter as RSDLP Minutes.

[64] Robert Weinberg, *The Revolution of 1905 in Odessa: Blood on the Steps*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 65-66.

[65] Lenin, "How the "Spark" Was Nearly Extinguished," (1900) *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, 335-36.

[66] "Времена меняются," *Искра*, May 1, 1903.

[67] *RSDLP Minutes*, 23.

[68] Lenin, "Does the Jewish Proletariat Need an 'Independent Political Party'?", *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, 331.

[69] *Ibid*, 331-32.

[70] Cited in "Мобилизация реакционных сил и наши задачи," *Искра*, June 1, 1903.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Józef Kwiatek, *Kwestya żydowska* (Kraków: Nakładem Administracyi "Prawa Ludu," "Naprzodu" i "Kolejarza," 1904), 34.

[75] Roman Rosdolsky, *Engels and the "Nonhistoric" Peoples: the National Question in the Revolution of 1848*, translated by John-Paul Himka (Glasgow: Critique Books, 1986).

[76] On early Ukrainian socialists and their relations with Russian Marxists, see George Y. Boshyk, *The Rise of Ukrainian Political Parties in Russia, 1900-1907: with Special Reference to Social Democracy* (Ph.D. diss., University of Oxford, 1981).

[77] Л. Рыбалка, *Русские социалдемократы и национальный вопрос* (Женева: Издание редакции украинской социалдемократической газеты "боротьба", 1917), 31.

[78] Cited in Boshyk, 409.

[79] Lenin, "Critical Remarks on the National Question," (1913) *Collected Works*, Vol. 20, 31.

[80] Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz (Elehard Esse), "Socialistes Polonais et Russes," *L'Humanité Nouvelle: Revue Internationale: Sciences, Lettres et Arts* 3, 4 (1899): 449-50.

[81] К.К., "О еврейском рабочем движении," *Заря* 4 (1902), 50; "Z pracy," *Przedświt* 22, 8 (1902), 310.

[82] Lenin, "The Position of the Bund in the Party," (1903) *Collected Works*, Vol. 7, 100-02.

[83] Lenin, "The Position of the Bund in the Party," 100.

[84] Любовь Аксельрод (Еврей), "Несколько слов в ответ товарищу б-ву," *Искра*, January 25, 1904.

[85] *Медем*, 21-22.

[86] "Протоколы в съезда бунда. июнь 1903 г.," (1903) in *Андерсон*, 296.

[87] Cited in Aivars Stranga, *Ebreji Baltijā: no lenākšanas pirmsākumiem līdz holokaustam, 14. gadsimts-1945. gads* (Rīga: Latvijas Vēsture Fonds, 2008), 344.

[88] Joshua D. Zimmerman, *Poles, Jews, and the Politics of Nationality: the Bund and the Polish Socialist Party in late Tsarist Russia, 1892-1914* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 165-73, 184-90.

[89] Lenin, "The Position of the Bund in the Party," 101. Lenin's emphasis.

[90] Б-в, "Антисемитизм, ассимиляция и пролетарская борьба," *Искра*, December 15, 1903.



[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Karl Kautsky, "Das massaker von kischeneff und die judenfrage," *Die Neue Zeit*, 21, 36 (1903): 306. My emphasis.

[97] RSDLP Minutes, 223-29.

[98] RSDLP Minutes, 6. For a 1904 critique of this point by the Revolutionary Ukrainian Party, see Boshyk, 254.

[99] Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, 28.

[100] Lenin, "On the Manifesto of the League of the Armenian Social-Democrats," 326.

[101] Мазлах and Шахрай, 97.

[102] Lenin, "The National Question in Our Programme," 459.

[103] "Iskra o kwestyi polskiej," *Przedświt* 23, 9 (1903), 369.

[104] See the 1924 "Author's Note" in J. V. Stalin, "Against Federalism," (1917) Works, Vol. 3 (Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1953), 33.

[105] "Nationalitäten programm der österreichischen sozialdemokratie," (1899) in *Die Österreichische Sozialdemokratie im Spiegel Ihrer Programme*, edited by Albrecht K. Konecny (Wien: Dr.-Karl-Renner-Institut, 1977), 10.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Cited in Dopkewitsch, 21.

[108] Микола Порш, *Про автономію України* (Київ: Просвѣщення, 1907).

[109] Медем, 34-6.

[110] Ibid., 47.

[111] "Протоколы V съезда бунда. июнь 1903 г.," 285.

[112] Медем, 29.

[113] Ibid., 53-54.

[114] Ibid., 55.

[115] Zimmerman, 55, 109, 177; Russian Social Democratic Labour Party Minutes, 229.

[116] Shukman, 229-30; Russian Social Democratic Labour Party Minutes, 221

[117] Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz, "Program narodowościowy socjalnej demokracji austriackiej a program P.P.S.," (1903) in Wybór pism politycznych (Kraków: Nakładem Drukarni Narodowej, 1907), 201.

[118] Ibid., 215.

[119] Ibid..

[120] Ibid., 216-17.

[121] Karl Kautsky, "Die nationalitätenfrage in russland," Leipziger Volkszeitung, April 29. 1905.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Lenin, "Resolutions of the Summer, 1913, Joint Conference of the Central Committee of the RSDLP and Party Officials," (1913), in Collected Works, Vol. 19, 427-29.

[126] Lenin, "The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination. Theses," (1916) Collected Works, Vol.22.

[127] See Lenin, "The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up," (1916) Collected Works, Vol. 22 and "A Caricature of Marxism and Imperialist Economism," (1916) Collected Works, Vol. 23.

[128] Cited in Jurij Borys, The Sovietization of Ukraine, 1917-1923: the Communist Doctrine and Practice of National Self-determination (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1980), 134.

[129] Lenin, "Declaration of Rights of the Working and Exploited People," (1918) Collected Works, Vol. 26.

[130] See John Riddell, ed., To See the Dawn: Baku, 1920-First Congress of the Peoples of the East (New York: Pathfinder, 1993).

[131] Smith, The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 6.

[132] Popov, Outline History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Vol. II, 72.

[133] On the general evolution of Bolshevik national policies in these years see, for example, Smith, The Bolsheviks and the National Question. On the Soviet Union's "affirmative action"

policies, see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (London: Cornell University Press, 2001).

[134] Moshe Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).