Re-examining Lenin's writings on the national question: an early marxist critique from the imperial periphery

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On the centenary of Vladimir Lenin's death, this article revisits his pre-1917 writings on the right of nations to self-determination from the perspective of his Ukrainian contemporary, Lev Yurkevych.

Unlike the well-known polemic between Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, the critique of Lenin's views on national emancipation posed by socialists from the Russian Empire's peripheries has been largely overlooked. This is no surprise, given the Russian Communist Party's deliberate efforts to erase dissident voices and the Western public's longstanding attachment to the perspectives of the Russian imperial centre. This bias not only shaped our understanding of the 1917 revolutions as a 'Russian revolution' but has also influenced our global perceptions of the 'postSoviet' region – an intellectual habit with important political consequences, as made evident after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

The polemics between two Marxists – a prominent Russian and a largely forgotten Ukrainian – took place almost 110 years ago but remain strikingly relevant. This debate not only reveals the oppressive potential of universalist projects in an imperial context, but also highlights deep-seated tensions within Marxist thought as such. It brings to light questions of structure and agency, diversity and unity, and universalism and particularism that remain relevant to contemporary emancipatory struggles.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels devoted relatively little attention to nationalism as a distinct problem. While they acknowledged that nationalism of the oppressed could, in some cases, contribute to the workers' struggle, they ultimately saw it as an ideology intended to create an illusory unity between the working class and the bourgeoisie, thereby obscuring the fundamentally antagonistic nature of their class interests. This perception of national identity as nothing but an artificially sustained 'false consciousness' became a widely accepted view among social democrats of various tendencies for decades.[1] Within social democracy, debates on this issue were driven by the need to formulate a programme that could accurately assess the moment and identify the most effective strategies for advancing the working class toward revolution – a challenge that was also central to Lenin's objectives.

Lenin found himself fighting the political battle on two fronts. On one side, he faced Jewish, Caucasian, and Ukrainian socialists who advocated for reorganizing the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) into a federation of national parties and, partly inspired by Austro-Marxism, sought to incorporate the principle of extraterritorial autonomy for minorities into the party programme. Lenin firmly opposed both demands, viewing them as leading toward the potential

dissolution of the party and, consequently, weakening the labour movement. On the other side, he clashed with members who shared the perspective of Luxemburg. Based on her analysis of capitalism's economic dynamics, Luxemburg argued that imperialist domination by the great powers created not only profound social inequalities but also increasingly favourable conditions for class struggle and proletarian victory. In such circumstances, any defence of national particularisms would be at odds with the logic of historical development.[2] To outmanœuvre these conflicting tendencies, Lenin proposed a dual approach: he introduced the principle of 'the right of nations to self-determination' into the party programme while simultaneously emphasizing the need for the absolute unity of workers from all nations within a centralized party structure.

Still today, socialist debates on nationalism often bring to mind the well-known polemic between Lenin and Luxemburg. Yet, despite its prominence, Lenin's disagreement with Luxemburg on this issue was less profound than his divergence with the Austro-Marxists and their followers. Prominent Austro-Marxist theorists, Otto Bauer and Karl Renner, argued that national cultures, with all their unique characteristics, held intrinsic value warranting preservation and accommodation within a socialist framework.[3] In contrast, both Lenin and Luxemburg shared a vision of progress and history wherein the ultimate aim of human development involved 'promoting and greatly accelerating the drawing together and fusion of the nations'.[4] Lenin proposed, however, a distinct political strategy, arguing that the nationalism of oppressed groups held a unique potential to advance the struggle against the bourgeois state and thus accelerate the victory of the proletariat. He advocated in favour of using the energy of the oppressed nations for the benefit of the worker's revolution.[5] Their debate, therefore, centred not on the ultimate goal of the socialist project, but rather on the means by which to achieve it.

He aligned with Luxemburg on the positive role of large states in advancing progress, believing that fragmentation of existing large states would represent a setback for working-class interests. Nevertheless, as the economic advantages of large states are simply too compelling to abandon, Lenin argued there is no need to fear temporary separations.[6] Moreover, such separations could certainly be avoided altogether if a Social Democrat from the oppressor nation were to earn the trust of oppressed nations by endorsing their right to secede, while a Social Democrat from an oppressed nation advocated for 'voluntary integration'.[7] In essence, advocating for separation in present rhetoric would, in practice, lay the groundwork for future social and economic unification.

It is essential to keep in mind that, before 1917, Lenin's primary objective was neither to produce a comprehensive theoretical analysis of nationalism nor to propose a practical solution to the problem of national oppression, whether under capitalism or socialism. His priority was to develop a strategy that would secure his party's political hegemony within the working class across the broadest possible territorial scale, ultimately aimed at seizing power and spreading the revolution across the globe. In the initial stage of the revolution, supporting secessionist rights was a strategic necessity to secure the support – or at least the neutrality – of oppressed national groups at this critical juncture. In the subsequent stage, once power was seized, he anticipated that these groups would integrate naturally into a single, centralized socialist state, never fully addressing the possibility of a socialist state choosing to remain independent.

Lenin's theses faced strong criticism from both 'federalists' and 'luxemburgists'. Notably, in both cases, the leading figures of these critiques were from Ukraine. In 1916, Georgii Piatakov and Evgeniia Bosh called for the removal of the party programme's article on the right of nations to self-determination. Lenin's tactical manœuvres did not satisfy Piatakov, who prioritized ideological consistency. How, Piatakov questioned, could one advocate the right of nations to self-determination while simultaneously opposing its practical application? For him, democracy was unattainable under capitalism, rendering democratic slogans a mere deception of the masses, while under socialism, with the eradication of economic exploitation and oppression, both personal and national, such

slogans would be simply irrelevant. Following the February Revolution, Piatakov and Bosh assumed leadership of the Bolshevik party in Kyiv and their convictions largely shaped the organization's stance toward the Ukrainian national movement.[8]

On the eve of the 1917 revolution, Lev Yurkevych, a Ukrainian Marxist theorist and founding member of the Ukrainian Social Democratic Workers' Party, published a brochure critically examining Lenin's programme on the national question.[9] He not only analysed Lenin's writings, but also critiqued them in light of the Bolshevik party's political practice. He observed, for instance, that despite their stated programme, the Bolsheviks 'never denounced national oppression' in their activities in Ukraine. At a party conference held in Kharkiv, Yurkevych noted, 'not a single word was said about Ukraine's national oppression and its "right to self-determination"'. On the contrary, he argued, Russian social democrats in Ukraine consistently 'took advantage of the consequences of this oppression to extend their influence'.[10]

Indeed, when addressing the cultural and linguistic russification of workers in 1913 and polemicizing against Yurkevych, Lenin argued that Ukraine was an exemplary case to illustrate its intrinsically progressive nature. He explained that the economic development had drawn hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russians to Ukraine and this influx had led to 'indisputable' and 'undoubtedly progressive' assimilation. Russification was transforming the 'ignorant, conservative, settled' peasant into a mobile proletarian. The 'historically progressive nature' of this assimilation was as clear for Lenin as the 'grinding down of nations in America'. To oppose this process 'would be a downright betrayal of socialism and a silly policy even from the standpoint of the bourgeois "national aims" of the Ukrainians'. The reason was simple: the only force capable of standing up to the Ukrainians' oppressors – Polish and Russian landlords – 'is none other than the working class, which rallies the democratic peasantry behind it'.[11]

Several aspects of Lenin's reasoning merit our attention. First is his sudden 'oblivion' regarding the imperial character of Russian internal state governance, which becomes apparent when he compares the russification of subjugated populations in the Russian Empire to the American 'melting pot' of mostly immigrant communities. Applying a free-market logic to the socio-cultural realm, Lenin contended that the task of Social Democrats was to eliminate privileges for all languages, allowing 'the requirements of economic exchange to determine which language in a given country it is to the advantage of the majority to know for the sake of commercial relations'.[12] Yurkevych countered that the Russification of Ukrainians is not the outcome of voluntary choice by individuals free of constraint; rather, it is made possible through colonial expansion, uneven economic development between urban and rural areas, and political and economic coercion.[13] Advocating for 'equality' of languages within such entrenched social and cultural inequalities effectively endorses the law of the strongest. However, what Yurkevych perceived as an expression of both cynicism and imperialism is, for Lenin, a consistent internationalist stance.

For the Bolshevik leader, the fact that the Russian language was state-promoted and equipped with all the necessary infrastructure to foster a high literary culture, while other languages' development was deliberately obstructed, presents no issue. He stated, indeed, that he would likely support giving every resident of Russia the opportunity 'to learn the great Russian language'; the only thing he does not want is to send people to 'paradise' by force. The coercion would only 'hinder the great and mighty Russian language from spreading to other national groups'.[14] This stance is not to be interpreted, however, as an expression of Russian supremacism. It is rather a logical outcome of a perspective that views distinctions as obstacles to be overcome and assumes the desirability of a future where diversity will merge into a single, universal whole. For Lenin, the Russian language represents simply the most 'practical' choice for realizing this supposedly non-national ideal.

Analysing this early twentieth-century polemic through the lens of a late twentiethcentury post-

Marxist critique, we could argue that Lenin's stance exemplifies what Cornelius Castoriadis has identified as a broader tendency within Marxist thought to naturalize capitalist social imaginary, with its supremacy of efficiency.[15] For Lenin, language is ultimately reduced to a functional tool for economic utility. This utilitarian perspective echoes the capitalist logic that everything – including language, culture, and human relations – should be subordinated to productivity. In this sense, Lenin's position aligns with a capitalist outlook that values culture only insofar as it serves the ends of production. By advocating for the elimination of linguistic privileges while implicitly assuming the dominance of Russian, it also reveals an underlying belief that equality requires uniformity.

Yurkevych pointed out the practical political consequences of Lenin's position that praised the assimilation of workers into the imperial culture. He argued that although through Russification a Ukrainian may have gained access to education and, with it, some progressive and emancipatory ideas, he is no longer able to transmit these ideas to members of his original peasant community. Russified Ukrainians develop shame and contempt not only for their own culture and language but, more significantly, for their community of origin, leading them to turn their backs on its needs, interests and aspirations. Russification of the Ukrainian proletariat thus contributes, according to Yurkevych, to alienating city workers from their rural counterparts, thereby 'breaking the unity of the workers' movement and hindering its development'.[16]

For Yurkevych, when workers of an oppressed nation are thus divided, they become easy targets for nationalist reactionary parties that exploit these divisions. In his view, Bolsheviks' practical promotion of assimilation alongside the rhetoric advocating separation was not merely hypocritical but openly harmful. Yurkevych pointed to the fact that Lenin insisted on interpreting the right to national self-determination strictly as a right to secession, firmly rejecting any calls for federalism or autonomy. Indeed, in his private letter to Stepan Shaumian, Lenin even emphasized that the 'right to self-determination is an exception to our general premise of centralization' that 'must not be anything more than the right to secede'.[17] A call for independence was, however, seen as dangerous by Ukrainian Marxists, who confined themselves to calls for autonomy inside a common federalist state. Most of them were conscious that in the conditions where more than 90% of Ukrainian population were illiterate peasants, and where democratic institutions and civic consciousness were practically inexistent, full state independence would mean the victory of a foreign bourgeoisie over the poorly organized indigenous masses. For Yurkevych, Lenin's rhetorical radicalism was a manifestation of his disregard for workers and peasants of oppressed nations. The Bolsheviks' stance, he argued, strengthened the agenda of right-wing nationalists at the expense of local progressive forces.

The polemic brings to light another crucial issue in Marxism: who constitutes the working class, and who, in practical and theoretical terms, acts as the agent of its emancipation? Both Lenin and Yurkevych would agree that 'the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself'. Yet their implicit definitions of the working class reveal different conceptions of agency and emancipation. Lenin envisions a mobile proletariat, transcending local identities and cultural particularities – a universal revolutionary force (represented, in practice, within the context of Ukraine by the Russian-speaking industrial worker). In this framework, 'backward' peasants are positioned as followers, to be guided by this universal agent toward liberation. For Yurkevych, however, true emancipation requires recognizing the specific conditions, interests and identities of different working-class populations, including Ukrainian peasants who constitute its majority.

Yurkevych draws an intriguing parallel between Lenin's views and those of Alexander Herzen,[18] a prominent Russian intellectual who, in 1859, affirmed Poland's 'total and inalienable right to independence from Russia', while simultaneously arguing that such a separation was not desirable from his perspective. Herzen reasoned that if Poland seceded immediately, it would weaken the

democratic movement and thus reduce the prospects for revolution in Russia. After a democratic revolution in Russia, he believed, Poland's departure would no longer be necessary. For both Herzen and Lenin, these positions were not motivated by Great Russian nationalism or a desire to dominate other peoples. Instead, they considered themselves champions of a universalist project of emancipation. Yet both shared a conviction that it was their community that would serve as the primary agents of this liberatory mission. Both believed it was the Russian 'people' – be it the Russian pre-modern peasant obshchina for Herzen, or the Russian modern proletariat for Lenin – who would lead the path to liberation, first for their neighbours and eventually for all humanity.

Yurkevych was just one of many Ukrainian socialists, including some Bolshevik members, who raised similar critiques of Lenin.[19] All pointed to the contrast between theoretical praise for bottom-up liberation and the practical refusal to account for local contexts and the specific interests of non-Russian groups. Laclau and Mouffe's conception of socialist strategy offers a useful theoretical parallel to these early critics,[20] suggesting that political hegemony requires a coalition of diverse social identities, each retaining its specific demands and particularities within a broader framework of solidarity. The working class, in this view, is not monolithic but a diverse collection of groups. This perspective challenges the notion of a singular, universalist agent of change and instead advocates for a model where agency is expressed through specific historical and cultural contexts. It demands a democratic, self-organized approach to liberation. In Yurkevych's critique, we see an early articulation of the risks of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to socialism – an approach that, when applied to (post-)imperial contexts, reinforces oppression rather than dismantles it.

A short quote from the Resolutions of the Summer 1913 Joint Conference of the Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P. and Party Officials can exemplify the authoritarian potential of the Marxist conception of historical 'laws' of development that Castoriadis later critiqued. It states that the right of nations to self-determination 'must under no circumstances be confused with the expediency of a given nation's secession'. It is the party that 'must decide the latter question exclusively on its merits in each particular case in conformity with the interests of social development as a whole and with the interests of the proletarian class struggle for socialism'.[21] And since the Bolsheviks regard their organization as the vanguard of the proletariat, uniquely equipped to grasp the logic of history and the true interests of the working class, it ultimately falls to the party leadership to determine whether a particular national liberation struggle is legitimate. In other words, by assuming history has an objectively knowable direction and by claiming a scientific understanding of this trajectory, leaders position themselves and their organizations as interpreters of historical necessity, granting them the authority to impose a 'correct' path on the very groups they claim to represent.[22] It reveals a disregard for the agency of the population as well as an underlying belief that one has the authority to engineer society from above, and to treat it as an object to be rationally organized and directed according to the needs of an impersonal force of History. This instrumental approach treats populations as stepping stones in a larger project, rather than autonomous agents with their own legitimate aspirations capable of acting independently. In other words, instead of breaking with capitalist imaginary, it perpetuates its logic of 'rational mastery'.[23]

In Yurkevych's words, Russian socialists' 'adulation for large states and centralism' undermines any genuine internationalist perspective.[24] Lenin, in seeking 'not only to put an end to the fragmentation of mankind into small states and to the particularism of nations, not only to bring nations closer together, but also to achieve their fusion', had positioned himself not as a spokesman for internationalism but 'for the modern system of great-power centralism'.[25] It can be argued that this critique reveals a deeper tension over the very meaning of modernity and progress. It exposes different assumptions about the ultimate telos of human development – whether progress means the rational unification of diverse groups into a singular, cohesive entity or whether it allows for the coexistence of diverse and thus potentially divergent groups.

One conception views centralized states and homogenized societies as an inevitable outcome of human progress, seeing diversity as an obstacle to it. In this sense, it reflects a 'fantasy of totality',[26] where the ideal is a universal order achieved by eliminating particularities and consolidating smaller entities into a unified, rationalized system. Another conception envisions modernity as compatible with pluralism, difference and decentralization. This view of modernity values local governance, democratic participation and a decentralized structures that empowers different groups to control their destinies within a cooperative framework. More generally, it reflects a skepticism toward the totalizing ideal, highlighting the potential dangers in pursuing a universalist model that erases particularities.[27]

One might argue that Lenin and some other Bolsheviks ultimately recognized and allowed the differences to contribute to the Soviet project, as seen in the introduction of the New Economic Policy and korenizatsiia after their precarious and costly victory in the civil war. However, one must look past the trees to see the forest: the ultimate telos of the Bolshevik project remained the fusion of all differences into a single, unified totality where all meaningful distinctions – and thus all potential for conflict – would and thus should disappear. What shifted was not the goal but the time horizon – if in 1917 it seemed achievable in the near future, by 1923 it had become a more distant objective. Diversity was tolerated on the condition that it would eventually be transcended. Under Stalin, previous caution was abandoned in favour of an aggressive push to eliminate any elements perceived as threats to unity. The totalizing impulse was unleashed in full.

It should be stressed, however, that the idea of socialism as containing an 'inherent' totalizing essence is rather misleading. As Castoriadis argued, modernity is not a monolithic project but a dynamic and ongoing tension between competing significations: the impulse toward rational mastery and homogeneity on one side, and the potential for pluralism, self-limitation and democratic autonomy on the other.[28] Socialism, as a modern project, also contains both of these logics within itself, meaning that it is not bound to a totalizing vision. If socialism is to fulfil its emancipatory promise, as Laclau and Mouffe suggest, it must accept that any unity will be a contingent and provisional outcome, never permanently resolved. In this sense, political structures should not be vehicles to enforce a 'correct' path but should remain open to continuous critique. The capacity of socialism to resist totalization thus depends on its commitment to multiplicity and contestation, recognizing diversity and antagonism as essential to the social fabric. This approach implies, though, that democratic socialism always contains the seeds of its own undoing. Here lies, for Castoriadis, the tragic aspect of democracy: the same conditions that enable continuous renewal also expose it to the risk of being co-opted by forces that may exploit its freedoms to impose a closed, totalizing system in which questioning is no longer allowed.[29]

The enduring influence of Lenin's ideas on radical left thought has profound implications, shaping how questions of diversity, autonomy and self-determination are understood – and, in many cases, misunderstood. Certainly in the mid-twentieth century, critical theorists in the West began revisiting the arguments of Rosa Luxemburg, Council Communists and others who had foreseen the dangers of centralism as they took root in Bolsheviks' practice. However, despite a growing recognition that a commitment to diversity is essential to prevent emancipatory movements from devolving into dictatorship, the left-wing critics of Marxism-Leninism were slow to grasp not just its authoritarian but also its imperialist dimensions.

The Western left has historically been more attuned to the perspectives of the Russian imperial centre than to those of the peripheries. As a result, by prioritizing perspectives from Moscow and St Petersburg, the Western left often perpetuates the imperial blind spots of their Russian counterparts. Viewing national emancipation struggles through the eyes of Russian Marxists may, for instance, result in failing to recognize the intrinsic value that sovereignty, autonomy and cultural distinctiveness may represent for the oppressed populations.

As evidenced above, prior to the Bolshevik seizure of power, socialists from Ukraine had already voiced concerns about both the authoritarian and imperialist tendencies embedded in Bolshevik theory and political strategy. They argued that a genuinely socialist society must balance unity with respect for both political and cultural diversity, cautioning that disregarding these differences would inevitably lead to authoritarianism and the betrayal of emancipatory ideals. The lack of critical evaluation of Soviet imperialism from the left can be attributed, in part, to the fact that these early warnings from nonRussian socialists within the imperial peripheries were overlooked or simply dismissed. Acknowledging them reveals a richer and more diverse socialist tradition, one that underscores the importance of balancing unity with diversity – an issue that remains as relevant today as it was in the early twentieth century and will undoubtedly remain so in the future.

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Notes

1. Haupt, Löwy, and Weill, Les Marxistes.

2. Luxemburg, The Accumulation of Capital.

3. Blum and Smaldone, Austro-Marxism.

4. Lenin, Collected Works. Volume 22, 324.

5. Haupt, Löwy, and Weill, Les Marxistes.

6. Vladimir Lenin, Collected Works. Volume 20, 423.

7. Lenin, Collected Works. Volume 22, 347.

8. Soldatenko, Georgii Piatakov.

9. Iurkevych, Rosiisʹki Sotsial-Demokraty.

10. Ibid., 27, 37.

11. Lenin, Collected Works. Volume 20, 30–1.

12. Ibid., 21.

13. Iurkevych, Rosiisʹki Sotsial-Demokraty, 36.

14. Lenin, Collected Works. Volume 20, 72–3.

15. Castoriadis, The Imaginary Institution of Society.

16. Iurkevych, Rosiisʹki Sotsial-Demokraty, 37.

17. Lenin’s emphasis. Lenin, Collected Works. Volume 19, 501.

18. Iurkevych, Rosiisʹki Sotsial-Demokraty, 12–18.

19. See, for example, Shakhrai and Mazlakh, On the Current Situation in the Ukraine; and Shahrai, Revoliutsiia.

20. Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.

21. Lenin, Collected Works. Volume 19, 429.

22. Castoriadis, The Imaginary Institution of Society, 56–67.

23. For an alternative articulation of this idea, see Scott, Seeing Like a State.

24. Iurkevych, Rosiisʹki Sotsial-Demokraty, 24.

25. Ibid., 28.

26. Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.

27. It must be acknowledged that the conception of modernity prioritizing pluralism and decentralization is fraught with internal contradictions. A full exploration of these complexities lies beyond the scope of this discussion. For a deeper engagement with these contradictions, see, for example, Bauman, Modernity and Ambivalence.

28. Castoriadis, World in Fragments, 37–8.

29. Ibid., 93.

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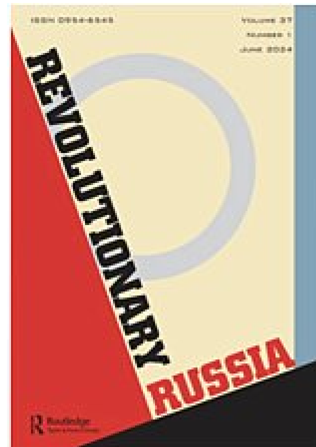

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