

A Proper Approach to the National Question*

The two editorials in *Political Affairs* in June and July of this year, entitled "Soviet Anti-Semitism": *The Kichko Book* and "Soviet Anti-Semitism": *The Status of Soviet Jews*, represent an important contribution for a number of reasons.

In the first place, the vicious slander of "Soviet Anti-Semitism," that is, state anti-Semitism—a slander which must be combatted by all honest people, no matter what differences they may have concerning certain Soviet policies, had to be taken up by the Marxist theoretical organ. There had to be not just a refutation, but a broad analysis, a marshalling of facts and figures. I repeat: not just a blank refutation and certainly not by applying to everybody the label of "cold-warrior." There can be no question, of course, that the instigators and peddlers of the slander of "Soviet anti-Semitism" are cold warriors, plain warmongers, open anti-Semites or spokesmen for anti-Semitic forces (Barry Goldwater, for instance, or Senator James Eastland, or Francisco Franco). But there are also honest people, fighters for peace and democracy, who have disagreements and questions and who are sometimes made use of by the cold warriors (people like Bertrand Russell, Norman Thomas, Dr. Martin Luther King, Arthur Miller and others).

By not stigmatizing everybody and anybody, by analyzing and clarifying, by raising questions and expressing disagreement not only on the Kichko book but on other matters as well—matters of combatting the remnants of anti-Semitic elements, of a proper approach to anti-religious propaganda and to Jewish culture, *Political Affairs* has given an example of how this entire subject must be treated. The forces of peace and friendship for the Soviet Union can only gain by such an approach. Instead of isolating oneself, one can gain allies among honest people by following this approach. The entire discussion by *Political Affairs*—in the manner it was raised—may be of assistance towards a solution of certain problems.

* This is a section of the comment sent by Paul Novick on the two editorials carried in the June and July issues of *Political Affairs*.

However—and this is *second*—there is another reason why the editorials in *Political Affairs* must be welcomed. Too long has the Marxist movement in the United States neglected the problems of the various nationalities in this country. As a matter of fact, these problems were hardly ever touched seriously. That this was a serious mistake, one can realize by observing how the Goldwaterites have tried during the election campaign to gain a foothold among the Poles, the Ukrainians, the Hungarians, the Lithuanians, the Italians and others.

There are *many millions* of Americans belonging to the various nationality groups—not only immigrant, but first, second even third American-born generations—who live their own lives, maintain certain national traditions, engage in national cultural activities, and have their own ties with their kinsmen abroad. Is it correct for progressive people, for Marxists, to leave these millions of Americans to the nationalists, the obscurantists, the reactionaries, the nazi-collaborators, who swarmed into this country after the Second World War?

It is high time the problems of the nationalities, as well as the national problem *per se*, were analyzed theoretically in accordance with historic development during the two world wars, the struggle against fascism and a third world war, the liberation movement in Asia and Africa, etc. And it is high time progressive people took a more active interest in the life of the national groups in the United States.

National Interests and Internationalism

It is by no means, it seems to me, an exaggeration to say that the *correlation between proletarian internationalism and the struggle for national interests represents one of the most important and most delicate problems before the Marxist movement*. Too often, unfortunately, fighters for national interests have fallen into the trap of nationalism, or have become nationalists themselves. Conversely, too often internationalists (or rather "internationalists") have become nihilists on national issues, thereby confusing matters instead of contributing towards a solution. At the same time, by their nihilism they played into the hands of the nationalists, the obscurantists, leaving open for them the field of activity among the given nationality.

We are now marking the centenary since the establishment of the First International. In this connection it will be appropriate to recall the essay of Lenin, *On the Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, written in 1914. There, Lenin refers to the struggle Karl Marx conducted in the First International against the nationalism of Mazzini

and the nihilism of the "Proudhon clique." In a letter to Frederick Engels, written June 20, 1866, Marx relates how, during a discussion at the Council of the International, the representative of "Young France" came forward with the thesis that nationality and nation are obsolete prejudices."

The British delegates chuckled, Marx writes, when he drew attention to the fact that the French delegates who would abolish nations were using a language—French—which nine-tenths of the delegates did not understand. Marx also intimated that under cover of the theory of abolishing nationalities, the French delegates expect the others "to be swallowed by the exemplary French nation."

It is now close to one hundred years since Marx wrote that letter, but it seems to me that certain sections of the Marxist movement, regretfully, still suffer from an approach which amounts to national nihilism, or can be interpreted as such. The legacy left by the socialist movement in the United States in this respect is hardly of any assistance. This movement, which has suffered from the opportunism of Ferdinand Lassalle brought over by immigrants from Germany in the latter half of the nineteenth century and from the sectarianism of Daniel De Leon and the Socialist Labor Party, became permeated with an "internationalism" which did not "recognize" the national problem—and which in turn became chauvinistic and jingoistic during World War I. (I have in mind the section of the old socialist movement led by Morris Hillquit and by Abraham Cahan of the *Jewish Daily Forward*.) We must beware of this legacy, of an approach to the national problem which has no relation to reality. And here I wish to dwell on certain opinions expressed in the editorial of the July issue.

Fight for National Equality A Major Task

The editorial quotes the following from an essay written by Lenin in October-December 1913, entitled *Critical Remarks on the National Question*. In polemizing with leaders of the Jewish Social Democratic organization, the Bund, Lenin asked: "Does anything real remain in the concept of assimilation after all violence and all inequality are subtracted?" To this he answered:

Unquestionably yes! There remains that universal historical tendency of capitalism to smash down national barriers, to erase national differences, to *assimilate* nations, with which each decade shows itself more powerfully, and which constitutes one of the greatest motive forces transforming capitalism to socialism.

That is what Lenin said in 1913. But he also said *immediately*, right in the next paragraph, the following:

Whoever does not recognize and does not fight against all national oppression or inequality, is not a Marxist, is not even a democrat.

This is *essential* in order to beware of *forced* assimilation (which was the case under the "cult"). Lenin states in the same essay: "Inseparably connected with the principle of complete equality is the guaranteeing of the rights of a national minority. . . . The incorporation in the constitution of a fundamental law which shall declare null and void all privileges whatsoever enjoyed by one nation and all infringements whatsoever of the rights of a national minority." Lenin cites the statistics of the number of pupils in the schools of St. Petersburg, in 1911, where there were 396 Jewish children out of a total of 48,076 and he outlines the program "that will cover this diversity of relationship" as follows:

Every citizen would be able to demand the rescinding of orders that would, for example, prohibit the hiring at state expense of teachers of the Jewish language, Jewish history, and so forth, or the provision of state-owned premises for lectures for Jewish, Armenian or Rumanian children, or even for one Georgian child.

These parts of the Lenin essay are certainly essential and should not have been omitted, I think, in the editorial. But there is much more to this subject than the omission of this or that paragraph.

One must ask: why is it that after the outbreak of the First World War Lenin did *not* raise the question of assimilation—if I am not mistaken—but, on the contrary, kept pointing out the mistakes of certain national nihilists, or Marxists who did not evaluate properly the question of self-determination? During the First World War he kept up his polemics with Rosa Luxemburg, with Pyatakov and others on the subject of self-determination and with the Trotskyites and Kautskyites on the evaluation of the Irish Revolution (which they considered nationalistic) and the struggle in Asia and Africa. Later on, in his book "*Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder*" he dealt with both the dogmatists and the vulgar reformists. He stated:

As long as national and state differences exist among peoples and countries—and these differences will continue to exist for a very long time, even after the dictatorship of the proletariat has been established on a world scale—the unity of international tactics

of the Communist working class movement of all countries demands, not the elimination of variety, not the abolition of national differences (that is a foolish dream at the present moment); but such an application of the *fundamental* principles of Communism (Soviet power and the dictatorship of the proletariat) as will *correctly modify* these principles in certain *particulars*, will properly apply them to national and state differences. (*Selected Works*, International Publishers, New York, Vol. 10, p. 135)

The question is: does one have to take into account Lenin's writing after 1913? The answer, I think, is obvious. And one must, of course, take into account what happened after the October Revolution, when Lenin's program on the national question was *put into effect*, bringing about a flowering of national culture never before seen in the history of mankind. Never in the history of the Jewish people was there such an upsurge of Jewish culture in Yiddish, also in Russian and even in Hebrew (the Habima theatre was founded in Moscow). This phenomenon (which kept developing until the "cult" terminated the Leninist program in 1937) aroused enormous sympathies for the Soviet Union among Jewish intelligentsia and the broadest strata of the Jewish people (and among non-Jews as well).

National Distinctions Persist

Of course, all this must be kept in mind. But one cannot limit oneself to a passage of an essay written in 1913 for other very important reasons.

It is well known that Lenin had great respect for the facts of life. He had little respect for theories which did not jibe with realities when conditions have changed. The question is *did* conditions change with the outbreak of the First World War? Was there after that time a "breakdown" of "national barriers" or an obliteration of "national distinctions" (to quote from the 1913 essay by Lenin)? Quite the contrary is the case! There was the struggle for self-determination and this is what prompted Lenin's polemics with Rosa Luxemburg.

There was a rise in national distinctions as a result of the war. This was expressed in a demagogic way in President Wilson's Fourteen Points which again gave rise to national distinctions. And it will be enough to recall briefly the period immediately after the First World War, with the establishment of the Polish republic and the Baltic republics, the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian empire, etc., and then to give thought to the period of the rise of fascism and Nazism and the Second World War, to realize what *tremendous changes* took place in the matter of national distinctions. To my mind,

it is the opposite of Leninism to stick to the wording of the essay of 1913 and to let it go at that.

The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union has introduced important changes, in a truly Leninist way, in the concept of the inevitability of war under imperialism, taking into consideration the changed world situation. Is it correct to hold on to formulations on the national question which might have been correct over fifty years ago but which have no relation to reality now?

The July editorial correctly states that the destruction of a third of the Jewish people by the Hitlerite barbarians has aroused the national consciousness of the Jewish masses. The same is certainly true of the peoples of Europe generally, more or less, particularly peoples who suffered from Nazi persecution and extermination. And what about the rise of national consciousness among the peoples of Africa and Asia due to the rise of the liberation movement and the struggle against colonialism?

For various reasons—and space is one—I will not at present go into the subject of assimilation *per se*, of who will assimilate whom among the great nations or even the smaller nations and its effect on human culture. Which will be the "exemplary nation," to use Marx's expression? This is not, it seems to me, a simple matter even among socialist states. Since the 20th Congress of the CPSU it has been recognized, I think, under a truly Leninist approach, that *the true internationalist is the best fighter for national interests, for national dignity, for progressive national culture*. The adherence to the formula of 1913 is, to my mind, wrong both according to Leninist principles and in respect of tactics.

Theory of Assimilation Divisive

To get back to the Jewish scene, one must point out that the slogan or theory of assimilation is a *divisive* one in the Jewish community and can only result in the isolation of those who propagate this theory. The Jewish community in the United States—the largest Jewish community in the world, numbering close to six million, of whom four million are concentrated in ten of the largest cities in the country—has never been so well organized around Jewish activities as is the case now. And this in spite of the "predictions" of Karl Kautsky fifty years ago that this community was about to "disappear," or the "predictions" of Israel Zangwill in his 1908 play, *The Melting Pot*. There is not one section of the Jewish community which is not up in arms against assimilation, with the exception of the relatively insignificant Council for Judaism, led by Lessing Rosenwald and others of the big bour-

geoisie. The assimilationist theories run counter to the realities of the Jewish community, *as well as to the activities of Jewish progressives* which are concentrated to a great extent around work for progressive Jewish culture. Assimilationist theories can only undercut these activities.

The burning issue in the Jewish community, as well as among the peoples generally, is *unity*—unity in the struggle against the ultras, the warmongers and cold warriors. Assimilation is not the issue. It would be criminal, I think, to leave it to the ultras to champion the cause of national interests—that is, to *harm* these interests—as the Goldwaterites did among the national groups during the election campaign. I wonder what Lenin would have said of such tactics, stemming from national nihilism or a false internationalism.

Let us recall the words of Georgi Dimitroff in his warning of how national nihilism among Marxists played into the hands of the fascists who appropriated to themselves national traditions—such as the heroic traditions of Garibaldi in Italy (G. Dimitroff: *The United Front*, pp. 79-80, International Publishers). Progressive people among the national groups must certainly participate in the general struggles of the American people, of whom these groups are an integral part. They must participate in the struggle of the labor movement, for civil rights. This goes without saying. To separate oneself from general struggles would certainly mean falling into nationalism and playing the game of reaction by undermining thereby the general struggles through separatism and segregation along national lines. But there is no contradiction between these struggles and the particular interests of the given national group. On the contrary, only by applying correctly general slogans to the demands of this or that group, both the interests of the nation generally and of the particular group will be served. It is dead wrong, however, to consider work among the national groups, activities for progressive national culture as something “nationalistic,” having no relation to the general struggle against reaction. Some progressives, unfortunately, think this way, thereby leaving the field to the reactionaries among the national groups and harming the general struggle to boot.

Marxism and Assimilation

Comrade Novick's criticism of the July editorial centers mainly around the contention that the quotation from Lenin was improperly used. He argues, first, that it was taken out of context, and second, that Lenin subsequently changed his position in the light of new historical developments and stressed not assimilation but the durability of national differences. In line with this, Comrade Novick maintains that the trend among American Jews today does not bear out the thesis of assimilation. He argues, finally, that to accept such a thesis is to espouse national nihilism and is, moreover, tactically wrong.

I believe that Comrade Novick misinterprets both the editorial and Lenin on this question. Before we proceed to examine this, however, a word is in order on the general use of quotations from the Marxist classics. A quotation from Marx or Engels or Lenin does not *as such* constitute proof of the validity of a theoretical proposition. It may at times be offered as containing supporting argument, but otherwise it is used (or should be used) simply as a means of illuminating a particular point—as an apt expression or summarization of it.

It is in this sense that the quotation from Lenin's *Critical Remarks on the National Question* was employed in the editorial. The point which the editorial makes is simply this: A historical tendency toward the amalgamation of nations and toward assimilation exists, and this tendency has manifested itself in the case of the Soviet Jews. Consequently the use of Yiddish has declined, and will continue to decline, entirely apart from any question of forcible repression. More, the greater the freedom from persecution and discrimination, the more rapidly does this process take place.

What is primarily at issue is the validity of these propositions, not what Lenin may have emphasized at various times under various circumstances. It is with this substantive question that I propose to deal.

Two Tendencies

Nations, Marxism holds, are a product of capitalism. The geograph-