

# Marxism's Opportunistic Interpretation of the National Question

by Norman Berdichevsky (August 2015)

In his only authentic and original contribution to Marxist theory, Stalin wrote an essay in 1913 that won the praise of Lenin and made Stalin into an internationally known figure in the worldwide Marxist movement. Entitled "The National Question and Social Democracy," Stalin attacked Austrian Socialist leader Otto Bauer, the proponent of "cultural autonomy" on a regional level for individuals of whatever ethnic background to choose and maintain their own sense of national identity as long as workers would realize that their class interests took precedence over ethnic origin or religion. Instead, Stalin argued that nations were an objective reality and that "A nation is a historically instituted stable community of people formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture... Among the Jews there is no large and stable stratum connected with the land which would naturally rivet the nation together. ....A nation has the right to arrange its life on autonomous lines. It even has the right to secede. But this does not mean that it should do so under all circumstances or that autonomy, or separation, will everywhere always be advantageous for the nation."

He rejected the Social Democratic solution of cultural autonomy on an individual basis and argued that such units as Poland and Lithuanian within the Czarist Empire were "crystallized units" with a definite homogeneous population inhabiting a definite territory.

Such a view prevailed in the form of government adopted by the Soviet Union as a federation of sixteen "Republics" representing the majority nationality in the corresponding territory – all of them to be "national in form and socialist in content." This meant for outward consumption almost nothing more than the use of another local language alongside Russian and the celebration of folk festivals featuring traditional and colorful costumes, songs and dance but NOT the cultivation of any serious literature or emotional identification with a pre-Soviet past.

In the light of the collapse of the USSR after seventy years of Soviet rule, the break-up of

its constituent republics, and the violent conflicts in Ukraine, unrest within the Baltic, stirrings of ultra-nationalism in the former Asian Muslim Republics as well as developments since 1920 outside the USSR where demand for increased regional autonomy and recognition of language rights even in such developed countries as Canada or Belgium, it is fair to say that Marxism's answer to the national question was a failure.

This is even more obvious when taking into account the shifting, opportunistic and controversial stands of the Kremlin regarding African-Americans in the United States, the Jews and Zionism, and the national rights of similar "Zion sister states" such as Armenia.

So called backward or "quaint peoples" who, in 1910, appeared to be on the verge of being submerged within large states dominated by another much larger ethnic group as were the Baltic Peoples, Jews, Armenians, Irish, Welsh, Slovaks, Czechs, Croats, Ukrainians, Moldavians, Maltese, Catalans, Basques, and French speaking Quebecois in Canada and on the "road to assimilation" all experienced a renewed and heightened sense of national identity and aspirations for independence.

### **Communist Party Support for a Separate Black Nation in the United States**

Initially suspicious of racial separatists and "Black nationalists" inspired by the anti-colonial movements in Africa, the American Communist Party was critical of the Universal Negro Improvement Association founded by Marcus Garvey. While accepting the fostering of class consciousness, it opposed regarding the Black population in the United States as a separate nation.

However, in 1928, the Comintern declared that the Negroes in the United States" constituted a separate national group and that black farmers in the South were an "incipient revolutionary force." Following the lead of utilizing Stalin's theory, the CPUSA pressed demands for a separate nation for Blacks in the South within the "Black Belt," a meandering swath of counties with Black majorities in Eastern Virginia, the Carolinas, central Alabama and the Delta region of Mississippi, Louisiana, and coastal areas of Texas. Stalin's 1913 essay was easily drafted to justify this program of regional self-determination. Most practical Party workers however ignored the new line of a Black Nation, and the Party immediately drew criticism from the NAACP. Other civil rights movements and leftwing organizations throughout the country in the urban North as well as the rural South.

### **The Jews, "Soviet Zionism" in the Far East**

Just as dramatic flip-flops characterized Soviet policy on the "National Question" with regard

to other ethnic groups. The Jews, because of their “fossil-like existence” and lack of a coherent contiguous territory or common language particularly vexed Marx and Lenin. Their theories of the disappearance of small provincial ethnic nationalisms could be put to a litmus test – the Jews, who should have been more ready, willing and able (many were) to participate in the new economy and lose their old “tribal” identity becoming either workers or capitalists. The fact that so many did not (or that their attempts to do so were not accepted by their neighbors) so antagonized Marx that he wrote a vindictive pamphlet in 1843, “On the Jewish Question,” retitled “World Without Jews” in English translation that was later used by anti-Semites to back their views.

Lenin added to the self-delusion of many Jews who hoped that the new soviet society would be a world without nations and religion. This naïveté persisted in spite of the fact that everywhere the communists seized power, the ideology of a world without nations was shelved in order to win the support of the “masses” with their ingrained national and religious prejudices. Early measures in the 1920s designed to further Yiddish as a “national language” and even establish a Soviet territory for a Jewish republic came to an abrupt end with the purges of the 1930s. The teaching of Hebrew was suppressed and regarded as reactionary or else counter-revolutionary indicating either expressions of support for religion or Zionism.

In 1930, plans were declared to establish a Jewish Autonomous Region in the Far East along the Amur River on the border with Manchuria (in a territory more than twice the size of Mandatory Palestine). This territory, Birobidzhan, had no connection whatsoever to any Jewish memory or affection. It consisted of mostly swamp and forest yet it too could be cited as an example of Stalin’s 1913 essay that for those Jews with a sense of ethnic solidarity, a majority could be formed in a specific territory to promote their Soviet citizenship as one of many “nations” under socialism. At its height in 1939, the region had a Jewish population of perhaps 18,000 and comprised only about 9% of the total population.

Nevertheless, no effort was made whatsoever to settle those Jews in Birobidzhan who had fled from Poland to the USSR after the German invasion in 1939 or encourage further Soviet-Jewish migration to the region. Today, the corresponding figure is less than 3% and contributions to Yiddish culture have been less than meager. This Soviet attempt to create an ersatz Yiddish speaking Jewish nation in the Far East was a last ditch effort to create some form of Jewish national existence based on the requirements of Stalin’s definition and to lessen the appeal of Zionism.

Although the USSR supported the partition of Palestine and creation of the State of Israel in order to “hand British imperialism a slap in the face,” it quickly reverted to its old time

notion that Zionism was reactionary and that the only true basis for a Jewish national existence for those Jews who desired it was their grotesque experiment to establish a Soviet pseudo-Zion state in Siberia.

Since the mid-1920s, Soviet authorities had declared that Hebrew could not possibly be taught in the modern educational system because it was nothing more than a liturgical language of Jewish religious tradition and not the national language of a people. Instruction in Hebrew was forbidden as reactionary because the Jews were not a nation with a common territory. This was all the more absurd because the Communist Party Hebrew press in Israel was generously subsidized from Moscow and boasted polished writers who nevertheless followed the Moscow line to the hilt – even fully supporting the Stalinist purges and charges against Jewish intellectuals, writers and doctors accused of treason or preparing a plot to assassinate Stalin and other high ranking Soviet officials.



**Front page of Israeli Communist daily newspaper in Hebrew, Kol Ha'am (Voice of the People)**

### **The Finnish Reds in Finland and North America**

Just as grotesque were Soviet propaganda attempts to justify their invasion of Finland in 1939 and create a rival Finnish nation in neighboring Karelia – where “authentic proletarians” could thrive and develop their national culture. Throughout the 1920s and well into the 1930s, the Finnish language section of the CPUSA was the largest foreign language section. It represented a significant minority of the immigrant population and their descendants in the Great Lakes and Canadian Prairie Provinces with a strong proletarian identity, limited knowledge of English and strong socialist traditions.

Many of them sympathized with the “Reds” in the Finnish Civil War of 1920 and were enthused by the Russian Revolution and were excited by the creation in the USSR of a new 16th Soviet Socialist Republic based on Finnish-Karelian identity to oppose the reactionary republic of Finland, presented very much as a parallel to Birobidzhan, *i.e.* , a competitor of Jewish sympathies for Zionism. For the Finns abroad this meant a true nation state in the spirit of Socialist ideals and proletarian culture. The Karelian SSR was regarded as a true expression of working class Finnish identity in opposition to the “rightwing authoritarian leader,” of Finland, Marshal Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim at a time when Germany and Stalinist Russia were allies (see NER May 2015, [The Left is Seldom Right](#) and [here](#)).

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