



# MARXISM AND THE NATIONAL QUESTIONS

Alex Callinicos  
1989



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## Marxism and the National Question Alex Callinicos (1989)

### **Introduction (Drew Povey 2022)**

Marxists are famous for declaring the right of oppressed peoples to self-determination. In the early 20th Century, Lenin developed this position to undermine the colonial empires and as part of the democratic mandate of his approach to socialism. But he also supported international solidarity of the working class. For Lenin, independence of the colonies and other oppressed peoples were meant to help to unite the global working class of all countries.

The short pamphlet “Marxism and the National Question” written by Alex Callinicos a leading British Marxist, who was born in Zimbabwe, explains the general approach to this issue by Marxists. In the introduction, we try to apply these principals to the current situation in Nigeria and conclude that socialists should not support independence for any ethnic group or region.

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As Alex says, there are many different types of nationalism. The fight against the European colonial empires in Africa, ending with Apartheid in South Africa, was obviously progressive. But the struggle for equality and democracy was not successfully continued, so for example, South Africa is now a more unequal society than under the Apartheid regime!

This was because with the rise to power of Stalin in Russia, the Communists in South Africa were encouraged to join the African National Congress (ANC) rather than maintaining their independence. As a result, the nationalists were able to gain

black majority rule and then impose neoliberal capitalism. A member of the Communist Party of South Africa was even the Minister of Privatisation in an ANC led government!

In many parts of the world, nationalism has replaced organised religion as the dominant ideology that helps to maintain capitalism. Nationalism is thus mainly reactionary in today's world – as shown by Donald Trump's racism and his slogan "Make America Great Again!"

We have to look carefully at the real world to determine whether we should support the right to independence or self-determination in specific circumstances. Marxists support genuine liberation movements, but we also want a united world. So we see independence as only the first step and a united Africa of a free peoples should be the next, step as part of the struggle for socialism.

There are few oppressed nations left in the world today, the Palestinians and Western Sahara being the only obvious exceptions. Most Scottish people want independence from the central British state, but within the wider emerging state of the European Union. In Britain socialists also support the re-unification of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland.

As Alex states: "nations don't reflect some "natural" identity but are formed through often violent processes in which minorities are forcibly incorporated and local cultures and languages suppressed to the benefit of those of the dominant group." Nigeria emerged from colonial domination and competition between the English and French imperialists.

Today, in Nigeria there are really no clearly oppressed ethnic groups. With the devolution to states of the Federation, all the major nations have several states which they are able to control and some states are controlled by smaller ethnic groups. Independence of any states could lead to oppression of minorities within these states.

There are Igbo governors of several states in the South East, there are Hausa and Fulani governors across the north and Yoruba governors in the South West. All these governors control huge financial resources, but in no cases are these really used to benefit the common people of whatever ethnic group. These governors control primary education, but have hardly introduced teaching in local languages, even in rural areas. Research indicates that this would be of significant benefit to children who do not speak English at home, at least for the first few years of schooling.

The president may be a Fulbe (Fulani), but he has hardly benefited the poorer members of his ethnic group, even in his home state. The fact that he cannot speak his mother tongue indicates the cultural oppression of many town Fulbe people. We do not think that people of the north and the south of Nigeria have different interests. When politicians talk about ‘northern dominance’ and ‘federal character’ this is just about sharing the loot between the corrupt elite of the different ethnic groups.

The appalling levels of poverty across all the geopolitical zones of Nigeria has led to violent reaction in many places. The form may be different, but the causes are the same, poverty, inequality and corruption. These fuelled Boko Haram (and now ISWAP) in the north east, bandits in the north west, farmer/herder disputes across the middle belt, IPOB in the south east and robbers and cultists in the south west. They also fuel kidnapping and an increase in criminality across the country. The sudden increase in poverty due to the lockdowns associated with Covid explains the sudden increase in insecurity we have suffered over the last couple of years.

We do not support the various separatist groups in Nigeria. They are all led by terribly reactionary individuals. But at the same time, we do not necessarily protect the ‘national unity’ of Nigeria. Like all countries in Africa, Nigeria of today is a historical accident whose borders were determined by European colonialists. We want unity of the working class beyond the borders of the current Nigeria, across Africa and the indeed the whole world.

We recognise that the support for separatist groups is a desperate attempt by many poor people to try and improve their wretched lives. We have to demonstrate in practice that unity of the labouring masses across Nigeria is more effective than uniting with the corrupt elite of individual ethnic groups. The protests in every state capital in solidarity with ASUU and the other education strikers, organised by the NLC in July 2022, shows the possibilities for such working class unity. The general strike of January 2012 also showed the potential for this unity of the labouring classes.

Our main enemy is the corrupt ruling elite, which includes a range of different ethnic groups. Our task is to unite the labouring masses of all ethnic groups so that together we can be successful in our fight against our common ruling elite and to begin to reduce inequality and corruption.

We need to extend this fight across Africa and indeed the world – so we need to unite with other workers across Africa and the world. The Communist Manifesto

ends with the words: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Proletarians of all countries, unite!” This is still true 150 and more years after it was written.

## Marxism and the National Question Alex Callinicos (1989)

We live in a world of wars and revolutions. Yet the participants in these conflicts usually justify their actions in terms, not of class, but of nation. Nationalism has replaced organised religion as the most important single form of the dominant ideology. However, there are many different types of nationalism. There is the nationalism of old imperialist states, and minorities within them, such as Scottish and Basque nationalism. There is the nationalism of liberation struggles against imperialism—in Ireland, South Africa, El Salvador, for example, (more recent examples might include the struggles in Palestine, Afghanistan under the US-led occupation) and of regimes like that in Iran, rhetorically anti-imperialist, brutally repressive internally. There is the nationalism of communalistic campaigns like that in India for a separate Sikh state.

Faced with this bewildering variety of nationalisms, how are revolutionary socialists to react? Does Marxism offer an adequate guide to dealing with the problems posed by the national question? Marxism's theoretical foundations are radically different from those of any sort of nationalist ideology. For Marxism, the motor of history is the class struggle. It follows that the main conflict in modern society is that between the international working class and the international capitalist class. National divisions are secondary compared to the class struggle, and constitute simply a peculiar form taken by that struggle. "The workers have no country," declares the Communist Manifesto.

The reverse is true for nationalism, which sees the world divided not into classes, but into nations. The class struggle represents the great threat to all forms of nationalism, from fascism to the "left wing" nationalism espoused by many regimes in the Third World, because it threatens to compromise the unity of the nation, to sacrifice the sacred "national interest" at the altar of the "selfish" interests of one section of the nation. Depending on which class is identified as the threat to the national interest (the "monopolists" or "greedy workers") nationalism can take a more or less radical or reactionary form. Nonetheless, it remains nationalism, an ideology which places nation before class.

Marxism does not differ from nationalism solely in its theoretical basis. Its strategy for revolution is an internationalist one. For Marx and Engels the historic role of capitalism is the creation of a world economy of which individual national economies form integral parts. The internationalisation of the world's productive forces is the objective prerequisite for the establishment of communism.

In a famous passage in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels explicitly reject the thesis that socialism can be built in one country:

This development of the productive forces [on a world scale] is an absolutely necessary practical premise, because without it privation, want, is merely made general, and with want the struggle for necessities would begin again, and all the old filthy business would necessarily be restored.

Therefore to be successful the socialist revolution must be international. In recognition of this fact the Bolsheviks, when they led the Russian working class to power in October 1917, saw the spreading of the revolution to Western Europe as essential to the survival of the soviet state.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks therefore took the initiative in founding the Communist International in 1919. The statutes of the Comintern (adopted by its second congress in 1920) declare:

The new international association of workers is established to organise joint action by the proletariat of the different countries which pursue the one goal: the overthrow of capitalism, the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat and of an international Soviet republic which will completely abolish all classes and realise socialism, the first stage of communist society.

How, then, do international socialists relate to a world that is divided into nation states?

There is a certain tendency in some of Marx's and Engels's writings to treat national divisions as a phenomenon that would wither away with the further development of capitalism. The formation of nation states they see as essential to the creation of the home market, without which the economic domination of capitalism is impossible. However, they write in the *Communist Manifesto*:

National differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto.

This remains no more than a tendency in the work of Marx and Engels. It was left to Karl Kautsky to generalise these hints into a theory according to which the development of capitalism would gradually undermine the existence of separate nation states. However, in reality the development of capitalism on a world scale



has sharpened, not weakened, national divisions. The creation of a world capitalist economy in the late 19th century took the form of imperialism—the dominance over the rest of the world of a few advanced capitalist states. Imperialism had a number of consequences from the point of view of the national question.

First of all, in the advanced capitalist countries imperialism has involved a tendency towards state capitalism—that is, a tendency for the state and big capital to coalesce into a single integrated economic complex. The result of this tendency is that conflicts between competing capitals often take the form of confrontations between different nation states. During the period of “classical” imperialism, from the 1890s to the 1940s, the economic struggle between the imperialist powers for the most favourable territorial division led twice to world war.

Connected with the trend towards state capitalism in the advanced countries is the development within the workers’ movements of these countries of reformist bureaucracies who see their interests as closely wedded to those of their own capitalist states. In this way the ideology of the national interest takes a hold on the workers of the advanced countries.

Thirdly, in the “backward” countries of the Third World exploited and oppressed by imperialism, their involvement in the international capitalist system gives birth to profound national movements. For the workers and peasants of these, their revolt against imperialism almost invariably takes the form of nationalism.

Finally, the past generation has seen the emergence of a number of major centres of capital accumulation—the newly industrialising countries (NICs) of the Third World such as Brazil or South Korea. The ruling classes of these countries are not merely the clients of Western imperialism, but have their own interests and the ability to defend these interests against the metropolitan powers—and each other. This economic shift has led to the emergence of “subimperialisms”—NICs which seek to become the dominant power of a particular region (perhaps extending to Nigeria for West Africa). In some cases they have no serious rivals; in others they do, which leads to military competition (such as between Greece and Turkey) and sometimes wars (such as the war between Iran and Iraq). The pattern of inter-imperialist conflict which led to two world wars is being reproduced on a smaller scale in various parts of the world.

In these four ways nationalism is endemic in modern capitalism. How have Marxists responded to this phenomenon?

The most important debates on the national question took as their starting point the problems posed for socialists by the two great multinational empires which dominated east and central Europe before the First World War—Russia and Austria-Hungary. In the case of the Tsarist empire, “the prison-house of nations”, in which Great Russians formed a privileged minority, the most important national question was that in Poland. Poland had been divided up between its neighbours—Prussia, Russia and Austria—in the 18th century. The largest part of the country, the kingdom of Poland, was under Russian rule. A series of heroic insurrections against foreign rule had made Poland the equivalent of Vietnam for 19th century European socialists and radicals.

With the development of industry, and consequently the emergence of an urban working class in Poland, the leadership of the national movement passed from the hands of the traditional nobility and bourgeois radicals to socialists. However, major differences emerged.

The Polish Socialist Party (PPS) adopted an essentially nationalistic position. According to the PPS, the struggle for national independence took priority over everything else. The struggle of Polish workers for their own emancipation was a diversion from the national struggle which threatened to disrupt the national unity of the Polish people. The PPS was even opposed to Polish workers participating in mass strikes during the Russian revolution of 1905. The social-patriotism of the PPS was challenged by the group of revolutionary socialists headed by Rosa Luxemburg and Leo Jogiches, the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania. Luxemburg did not confine herself to showing how the PPS’s nationalism threatened the unity of Polish and Russian workers. She went on to argue that the demand for Polish national independence was historically outdated and reactionary.

In the first instance, her argument was based on the analysis of the Polish social formation developed in her doctoral thesis where she showed that the evolution of industrial capitalism in both Russia and Poland was leading to the creation of a single economic organism uniting both countries. As a result, neither the Polish bourgeoisie nor the Polish working class had an interest in national independence—the former because they depended on Russian markets, the latter because they and Russian workers shared a common enemy. Only the petty bourgeoisie, the main social base of the PPS, continued to harbour utopian dreams of national independence.

Luxemburg concluded her thesis with these words:

The capitalist fusion of Poland and Russia leads to a final result, which has escaped the Russian government as well as the Polish bourgeoisie and the Polish nationalists: the union of the Polish and Russian proletariat to form the future gravedigger...first of the rule of Russian Tsarism and then of Polish-Russian capitalism.

Luxemburg subsequently developed her critique of Polish nationalism into a position of general opposition to the slogan of national independence. In a series of articles she argued that the formation of a capitalist world economy had destroyed the material basis for national independence. She concluded, “The return to an objective which consists in dividing up all existing states in national units and limiting their relations to those of small national states is a completely hopeless and historically reactionary venture.”

A very different position was developed by Marxists in the Austro-Hungarian empire. This ramshackle multinational state embraced what is now Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and much of Yugoslavia, and was riven by national tensions between the dominant groups—the Germans and the Magyars—and the various oppressed Slavonic nationalities. These tensions affected the workers’ movement itself.

The theoretical school which dominated the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPO), the Austro-Marxists, were concerned, like Luxemburg, to preserve the unity of the workers’ movement. However, they sought to do so by preventing the fragmentation of the Hapsburg state. They argued that this could be achieved by certain reforms—in particular, the ceding of political and cultural autonomy to the different national groups within the empire, but not by granting them the right to self-determination.

There is a certain similarity between the Austro-Marxists and the opponents of devolution on the British left who claim to preserve the unity of the British working class by defending the integrity of the British imperialist state. Similarly the Austro-Marxists sought to dampen down national tensions within the workers’ movement by patching up the structure of the Austro-Hungarian state.

The theoretical underpinnings for the Austro-Marxists’ position were provided by one of their leading thinkers, Otto Bauer, in a major study, *Social Democracy and the National Question*. In this book he interpreted nationalism as primarily a cultural phenomenon. As such the national question was for Bauer a problem of how a genuine cultural community could be created through the victory of socialism, the ways in which the working class could take over the culture inherited

from capitalist society. The political problem of the struggle against national oppression was ignored.

As the Marxist historian Raimund Loew pointed out, “This position expressed a double opportunism vis-à-vis both the Hapsburg monarchy and the national tendencies. Outside the ruling house itself, the Social Democrats were the only international political factor in the empire. Their opposition to the centrifugal nationalist tendencies in the name of a policy of peaceful social and political reform brought them to a certain objective convergence of interests with the government.” At the same time, the SPO’s support for “cultural-national autonomy” blended into ‘the ideology...according to which internationalism allowed the workers of each nation to be nationalists, as long as they granted the same right to the workers of other nations...the resulting promotion of national differences between the workers of different parts of Austria could not but undermine the political unity of the proletariat.’ By the outbreak of the First World War, when the SPO supported the monarchy, there were separate Czech and German Social Democratic Parties and trade union movements.

The debate on the national question was sharpened by the outbreak of the First World War. On the one hand there were the open social patriots, like Noske, Ebert and Scheidemann in the German Social Democratic Party, who openly endorsed the nationalism of their own ruling class. On the other hand, there evolved a radical left which followed Rosa Luxemburg in both her unflinching opposition to the imperialist war and her rejection of the slogan of national independence as historically reactionary. Lenin adopted a radically distinct position. He supported the demand for national self-determination but as part of the struggle against imperialism.

He did so in the first place because he believed that winning the workers of the imperialist countries to a position of supporting the right of the oppressed nations to self-determination, including the right to secede, was an essential precondition to breaking the hold of social-patriotic and chauvinistic ideas upon their minds. Lenin wrote, “In the internationalist education of the workers of the oppressor countries, emphasis must necessarily be laid on their advocating freedom for the oppressed counties to secede and their fighting for it.” This argument was essentially a generalisation of the reasons Marx had given for the First International’s support for Irish independence. He had written in 1870:

Every industrial and commercial centre in England now possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a

competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish workers he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself. He cherishes religious, social and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude towards him is much the same as that of the “poor whites” to the Negroes in the former slave states of the USA. The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money. He sees in the English worker at once the accomplice and the stupid tool of the English rule in Ireland.

This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short, by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organisation. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it.

British socialists had therefore, said Marx, to support Irish independence as part of the struggle to unite the working class in Britain itself. Fifty years later, in a world where imperialism had made the divisions analysed by Marx in Britain a global phenomenon, Lenin extended this argument into a general defence of the right to self-determination of oppressed nations.

But support for national self-determination was more than a method of fighting social patriotism in the advanced capitalist countries. Lenin saw this position as an element in his strategy of rousing the colonial masses against imperialism.

Here Lenin broke radically with the past. During the earlier debates the national question was treated as an essentially European problem. The colonies were quite a separate matter, and there were those who argued that after the victory of socialism in the advanced capitalist countries the latter would continue to rule their colonial empires in order to raise the “barbarians” of Africa, Asia and Latin America to the level of “civilisation”.

After Lenin all this changed. The Russian Revolution itself challenged the evolutionary schemes constructed by these theoreticians — by showing that the working class could take power in a relatively backward country before the workers of Germany or Britain had overthrown their capitalists. For Lenin the colonial masses were no longer a problem but a force to be won to the struggle against capitalism and imperialism. The national question was married irrevocably to the struggle against imperialism. In Leon Trotsky’s words, “What characterises Bolshevism on the national question is that in its attitude towards oppressed

nations, even the most backward, it considers them not only the objects but also the subjects of politics.”

Against those revolutionaries who regarded national struggles as a diversion from the class struggle, Lenin wrote (at the time of the 1916 Easter Uprising in Dublin):

To imagine that social revolution is conceivable without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression etc—to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution. So one army lines up in one place and says, “We are for socialism,” and another somewhere else and says, “We are for imperialism,” and that will be a social revolution. Whoever expects a “pure” social revolution will never live to see it.

The implication is that In the epoch of imperialism profound social revolts will often take nationalist forms and develop in an anti-capitalist direction. However, this position did not represent for Lenin the slightest compromise with nationalist ideologies. He saw support for the right of national self-determination as a means of creating international working class unity, not destroying it. Lenin was careful, therefore, to distinguish between the tasks of revolutionaries in oppressor and oppressed nations. In the former the main enemy is the nationalism of the oppressors, and socialists must campaign in support of the right of national self-determination, both to challenge the hold of chauvinism on the workers’ movement and as a practical demonstration of internationalism. In the oppressed countries, on the other hand, revolutionaries must combine firm opposition to imperialism with clear support for international working class unity. The latter involves both ideological and political struggle against the bourgeois nationalists who seek to subordinate the class struggle to the national struggle and, in certain cases, opposition to the exercise of the right of self-determination.

From this point of view, Luxemburg’s position on national independence for Poland was not so much wrong as one-sided. She was absolutely correct as a Polish revolutionary to combat the social-patriotism of the PPS. Where she went wrong was to demand that revolutionaries in the oppressor countries should oppose the slogan of Polish independence. It was up to the Polish working class to decide whether they wished to form their own national state—the duty of Russian and German workers was to support their right to do so.

It does not follow, however, that Lenin believed that revolutionaries in oppressed countries should generally oppose movements for national self-determination, leaving it to revolutionaries in the oppressor countries to support them. Such a position would have meant Irish socialists such as James Connolly abstaining from the struggle against British imperialism. Where the demand for national independence becomes the focus for a mass struggle against oppression, it is the duty of revolutionaries to involve themselves in that struggle and indeed to fight for leadership. That does not imply the acceptance of the ideology of even revolutionary nationalism but rather that they should offer a distinctive strategy to achieve national self-determination based upon working class methods of struggle.

For Lenin, therefore, support for national movements did not involve compromising the political and organisational independence of the workers' movements in oppressed nations. The "Theses on the National and Colonial Question" adopted by the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920 declared:

A resolute struggle must be waged against the attempts to clothe the revolutionary liberation movements in the backward countries which are not genuinely communist in communist colours. The Communist International has the duty of supporting the revolutionary movement in the colonies and backward countries only with the object of rallying the constituent element of the future proletarian parties—which will be truly communist and not only in name—in all the backward countries and educating them to a consciousness of their special task, that of fighting the bourgeois-democratic trend in their own nation. The Communist International should collaborate provisionally with the revolutionary movement of the colonies and backward countries, and even form an alliance with it, but it must not amalgamate with it; it must unconditionally maintain the independence of the proletarian movement, even if it is only in an embryonic stage.

Lenin's position, therefore, had nothing in common with the various attempts to subordinate the working class to multi-class national liberation movements.

It was left to Trotsky to complete the Leninist approach to the national question by developing the theory of permanent revolution. According to this theory, which received its mature and general form as a result of the Chinese Revolution of 1925-7, the struggle in the backward countries for national independence could only be successful if the working class assumed the leadership of the struggle, in the process transforming it into a struggle for workers' power and seeking to spread a successful socialist revolution to other countries.

This position reflected Trotsky's understanding that the development of imperialism had led to a situation in which the objective prerequisites for socialism existed, not within any individual country, but on a world scale, while inclusion of each country in the international capitalist system implied that genuine national independence was impossible while this system existed. Trotsky concluded, not, as Luxemburg had, that the national struggle was irrelevant and reactionary, but that to succeed it had to develop into an international struggle for workers' power.

The significance of Lenin's treatment of the national question was twofold. First, it took as its starting point the existence of imperialism and sought to evolve a revolutionary strategy attuned to the domination of capitalism on a world scale. Second, it was a political theory. In this respect it differed sharply from the other positions on the national question. Both Kautsky and Luxemburg saw nation states as the product of a certain stage in capitalism's economic evolution. Kautsky drew a reformist conclusion—national conflicts could be peacefully overcome through further development of capitalism.

Luxemburg, by contrast, showed in *The Accumulation of Capital* that national conflicts were endemic to capitalism once its dominance had been established on a world scale and that these conflicts would contribute to the eventual breakdown of capitalism. However, she concluded that because the economic basis for national independence had been undermined by the development of imperialism, national struggles had become a diversion.

Again, Bauer and the Austro-Marxists treated nationalism as primarily a cultural problem which could be dealt with by reorganising existing state structures while awaiting the victory of socialism. Lenin, by contrast, saw nationalism as primarily a political problem—the struggle against social patriotism in the advanced countries and national oppression in the backward countries.

All other theories stressed either the economic or ideological (meaning cultural) aspects of the national question, while Lenin addressed it from the point of view of its effect upon the struggle of the working class for political power.

An understanding of this point enables us to grasp why those Marxists who, usually starting directly or indirectly from Stalin's Marxism and the National Question, seek to "define" nations by means of a set of economic, geographical and linguistic criteria, and so go sadly astray. When seeking to apply Lenin's position on the national question to the racial oppression suffered by blacks in America, Trotsky argued that "an abstract criterion is not decisive in this question [the 'definition' of nations], but much more decisive is the historical consciousness, their feelings



and their impulses”. He stressed that it was the experience of oppression by a particular state which produced national consciousness among the oppressed: “We do not, of course, obligate the Negroes to become a nation; if they are, then that is what they desire and what they strive for...the suppression of the Negroes pushes them towards a political and national unity.”

### **Applying the theory**

The Marxist approach to the national question, as developed above all by Lenin, represents a response to the reality of 20th century capitalism, and especially to the national conflicts it breeds. How, then, should we apply it today?

In the first place, we must always remember that Lenin defended the right to self-determination of oppressed nations. His starting point was the situation of a group driven to demand their own state by the disadvantages which they suffered either at the hands of imperialism directly or at the hands of the dominant class of the state ruling them. Supporting such an oppressed group’s right to self-determination is not the same as supporting any claim to national independence.

For sometimes such claims are raised by groups who wish to use their own state as a means of consolidating their domination over another group. If socialists supported any group prepared to fight for their own state it would imply support for, say, the Sikh fundamentalists in the Punjab, even though their struggle does not reflect any history of national oppression and takes the form primarily of attacking the Hindus, who are half the population in the Punjab. Socialists would have had to defend the right to self-determination of the Afrikaners in South Africa and of the Jewish settlers in Palestine. Yet the demand for national self-determination in both these cases amounted to claiming the right to use state power as a means of domination over the oppressed majority—respectively black South Africans and Palestinian Arabs.

Revolutionaries’ support for the right to self-determination is not an abstract principle, but arises from the struggle against imperialism, and is subordinated to the needs of that struggle. It therefore does not extend to support nationalisms which can triumph only through the oppression of others, thereby strengthening imperialism, but is

confined to those movements whose demands for national independence bring them into conflict with imperialism and whose victory will therefore undermine imperialism. The classic case of such a struggle is the Vietnamese, whose triumph over American imperialism long made it difficult for the US to intervene militarily in the Third World.

There are a number of these anti-imperialist national liberation struggles going on in the world today, to which Lenin's approach clearly applies. Our stance towards such struggles is summed up by the slogan, "Unconditional but not uncritical support". Our support is unconditional because it derives not from political agreement with the ideology of the national movement concerned, but from the fact of its conflict with imperialism. Trotsky supported the Haile Selassie regime against Mussolini's invasion, despite the fact that slavery still existed in Ethiopia, because the war was between a semi-colonial country and Italian imperialism. We support the Provisional IRA not because we agree with their politics—we are opposed to Irish Republicanism as a form of bourgeois nationalism—but because they are fighting British imperialism (at the time this article first appeared the IRA were engaged in a military campaign against the British state).

Support for a national movement that is conditional on political agreement with its programme all too easily leads either to opportunism or abstentionism. The tendency of the Western left has all too often been to give "communist coloration" to Third World nationalisms, which have proceeded to establish capitalist states presiding over the exploitation of "their" workers and peasants. The other danger is that of a sectarian refusal to support any but revolutionary Marxist organisations. By contrast, we support all genuinely anti-imperialist struggles irrespective of their politics. This allows us to combine principled opposition to imperialism with firm and ruthless criticism of the class-collaborationist politics of bourgeois nationalists, whether it be that of the IRA or of the ANC or of any other such movement.

There are, however, some more complex cases. There are, for example, the problems posed by the rise of nationalist movements within the "historic" European states—Scottish and Welsh nationalism in Britain, Breton and Occitan nationalism in France, Basque and Catalan nationalism in Spain. The emergence of these movements highlights the artificial character of even the oldest nation states—nations don't reflect some "natural" identity but are formed through often violent processes in which minorities are forcibly incorporated and local cultures and languages suppressed to the benefit of those of the dominant group. While it has generally been the uneven development of international capitalism which has exposed the fault-lines within these European states, typically major separatist movements have been precipitated by some overriding political factor, whether it be the repressive nature of the Francoist regime in Spain or the crisis of British Labourism.

The approach of revolutionaries to these national questions has to be more complicated than in the case of anti-imperialist struggles. The SWP's analysis of the national question in Britain involves three main elements:

(1) There is no genuine case of national oppression in Great Britain (the six counties of Northern Ireland are, of course, quite another matter);

(2) Our main enemy is, nevertheless, the existing United Kingdom state and the dominant British nationalism supporting it, and consequently we have no interest in preserving the unity of that state and support the right to self-determination of the Scottish and Welsh peoples (if they desire to exercise it);

(3) At the same time we should unrelentingly criticise the idea that Scottish and Welsh workers have distinct national interests different from those of workers in England, which justifies class collaboration between the leadership of the labour movement in Scotland and Scottish Tories, clergy and so on.

Yet another set of problems was posed by the war of 1980-8 between Iran and Iraq. Here there were three main considerations. The first was the Iranian Revolution of 1978-9 and its aftermath. Although the working class was the decisive force in overthrowing the Shah, the weakness of the Iranian left allowed Ayatollah Khomeini and the other mullahs to seize political power and impose a regime which wiped out the main gains of the revolution, justifying the exploitation of workers and the oppression of women and national minorities in terms of a reactionary Islamic fundamentalist ideology.

However, the regime was able to consolidate its hold partly because of its claim to be leading a struggle against the "Great Satan" of American imperialism. This has had important internal effects—much of the Iranian left sided with the regime after the US embassy in Tehran was seized by Islamist students.

The left throughout the Middle East is bankrupt—above all because of the influence of Stalinism which encouraged, for example, the Palestinian resistance to put its faith in "progressive" Arab regimes rather than in the workers and peasants of the region. Consequently in country after country Islamic fundamentalism has filled the vacuum, appealing especially to the urban poor as an apparently radical anti-imperialist ideology.

Fear of the political destabilising impact of Iranian fundamentalism on the Gulf states was one factor precipitating the Iran-Iraq war—the second issue—in August 1980. The Baath regime in Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein, was encouraged to attack

Iran by Saudi Arabia and other oil sheikhdoms terrified that they too would be swept away by the Iranian Revolution, and Washington seems to have taken a benevolent attitude for similar reasons.

Nevertheless, the war rapidly developed into a struggle for regional dominance. Iraq hoped to take over the role of military gendarme of the Gulf, which the Shah of Iran had inherited from Britain in the 1960s, while Khomeini sought, by destroying the Hussein regime, to put his own stamp on the Gulf. The bloody war of attrition, claiming a million lives, came to resemble the First World War, this time between two “sub-imperialisms” fighting for local rather than global hegemony. In this situation, the stance of revolutionaries could only be the same as Lenin’s, a defeatist position—the workers and peasants of each belligerent country could only gain by the defeat of “their” government.

The situation was changed by the third factor, the US military build-up in the Gulf in 1987-8 and the resulting clashes with Iranian forces. The Iranian Revolution had been one of the most serious defeats suffered by US imperialism in the previous 20 years. The US military confrontation with Iran altered the character of the Gulf War. Now Iraqi attacks on Iran were part of a broader imperialist campaign against Iran orchestrated from Washington. Some elements in the US administration clearly welcomed the prospect of war with Iran as a means of ending the “Vietnam syndrome”, which had blocked US military intervention abroad.

For revolutionaries to welcome Iran’s defeat in these circumstances would have been to line up with American imperialism. Revolutionary socialists now had to support the Khomeini regime against the US and its allies, including Iraq. Iran’s ultimate defeat in the Gulf was a major victory for Western imperialism.

Does this mean revolutionaries abandoning their opposition to the mullahs and their reactionary ideology? Absolutely not. During the Spanish Civil War, Trotsky argued that his followers in Spain should give the Republican government military but not political support—they should fight alongside the government forces but argue that Franco could only be defeated by revolutionary means (seizure of the factories and estates, the granting of Moroccan independence and so on).

In Iran this would have meant revolutionaries arguing that the only way the war could be brought to a conclusion satisfactory to the masses was by the use of revolutionary methods—workers’ control of the factories, seizure of the wealth of the ruling class, the right to self-determination of national minorities. They would seek to encourage working class discontent with the Khomeini regime and with its method of waging the war (trench warfare, human wave attacks, the bombing of

cities). However, they would direct this discontent, not to calling for an end to the war on terms that could only benefit imperialism, but to demands for revolutionary war—demands which could only be fulfilled on the basis of a revolutionary challenge to the Khomeini regime. They would explain, for instance, that the regime was impeded from fighting effectively against imperialism by its suppression of the Kurdish and Arab minorities in Iran, its support for the luxury corruption of the Iranian bourgeoisie, its corruption and so on. They would explain that the horrific losses suffered by the working class were due to the regime's way of waging the war. They would oppose every attempt to create confidence in the regime (for instance, by the regime's calls to donate unpaid hours of work to the war effort).

But revolutionaries would not support actions which could lead to an immediate collapse of the front and a victory for imperialism (for example strikes which would stop munitions getting to the front). The case of the Gulf War illustrates how the national question requires revolutionaries to make a careful analysis of the concrete situation when applying the Marxist approach to the national question in particular circumstances. Mere abstract opposition to nationalism will take us nowhere. As Lenin said, "Whoever expects a 'pure revolution' will never live to see it." People can come to fight capitalism through different avenues, including nationalism. To recognise this is not to capitulate to nationalism. On the contrary, support for the right to self-determination of oppressed nations is indispensable to breaking the hold of nationalism on the workers of the world.