

Lenin Against Stalin: The National Question

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Abstract: This piece examines the relation between Lenin and Stalin on the national question. This conflictual relation is especially important today, in the wake of Russian invasion of Ukraine and Putin's dismissal of the Ukrainian nation. It discusses the debate between Lenin and Stalin, and then moving to the contemporary struggles for national liberation.

Keywords: Lenin, Stalin, Ukraine, national liberation, self-determination

In the strange 21st century, in this world surrendered over to “ethnic cleansing,” tribal wars, and the fierce rivalry of financial sharks for control of the world market, it is not without interest to revisit the dream of Lenin and his comrades: a free socialist federation of autonomous republics. Vladimir Ilych had always fought, in many texts before 1917, for the rights of the nations of the Tsarist empire to self-determination. Hardly a week after taking power, the October revolutionaries published a declaration that solemnly affirmed the equality of all peoples of Russia and their right to self-determination until partition. The Soviet power would rather quickly recognize – partly as a *de facto* situation, but also out of a genuine desire to break away with the imperial practices and recognize national rights – the independence of Finland, Poland and the Baltic countries (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia). The fate of Ukraine, and that of the nations of the Caucasus and other “peripheral” regions will be decided during the civil war, with, in most cases, a victory for the “local” Bolsheviks, more or less - depending on the case - aided by the Red Army in formation.

Concerning Ukraine, this is what Putin, this worthy heir of the Romanovs, declared in a speech on 22nd February 2022, justifying the invasion of Ukraine that will take place a few weeks later:

“So, I will start with the fact that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia. This process started practically right after the 1917 revolution, and Lenin and his associates did it in a way that was extremely harsh on Russia – by separating, severing what is historically Russian land (...) When it comes to the historical destiny of Russia and its peoples, Lenin's principles of state development were not just a mistake; they were worse than a mistake (...)”¹

In the same speech, Putin makes his preference for Stalin very clear, who aimed to build “a unified state,” against Lenin, who proposed “odious and utopian fantasies inspired by the revolution.” Continuing his virulent polemic against Vladimir Ilych, Putin adds:

“Soviet Ukraine is the result of the Bolsheviks' policy and can be rightfully called “Vladimir Lenin's Ukraine.” He was its creator

and architect. (...) Lenin's ideas of what amounted in essence to a confederative state arrangement and a slogan about the right of nations to self-determination, up to secession, were laid in the foundation of Soviet statehood. Initially they were confirmed in the Declaration on the Formation of the USSR in 1922, and later on, after Lenin's death, were enshrined in the 1924 Soviet Constitution."²

In fact, Ukraine did not "secede" but, following the victory of the "Reds" in the Civil War in the former Russian Empire, it joined the USSR as an autonomous nation. The Bolsheviks merely recognized Ukraine as a separate nation from Russia – like many other republics of the Soviet Union. Putin's reactionary speech is an unintentional tribute to Lenin's politics of nationalities.

The confrontation between Lenin, already seriously ill, and Stalin that took place in 1922-23, was over the national question: "Lenin's last fight", according to the title of the famous book by Moshe Lewine. Whereas Lenin insisted on the need for a rather more tolerant attitude towards peripheral nationalisms and denounced great Russian chauvinism, Stalin saw the centrifugal national movements as the main adversary and struggled to build a unified and centralized state apparatus.

The conflict broke out over the degree of autonomy of the Soviet Republic of Georgia inside the emerging Soviet Union. Above local issues, the stake was basically the future of the Soviet Union. In an overdue and desperate struggle against the great Russian chauvinism of the bureaucratic apparatus, Lenin dedicated the last moments of his lucidity to confronting its main leader and representative: Joseph Stalin. In the notes dictated to his secretary in December 1922, he never stopped denouncing the great Russian and the chauvinistic spirit in "a rascal and a tyrant, such as the typical Russian bureaucrat is" and the attitude of a certain Georgian "who carelessly flings about accusations of "nationalist-socialism" (whereas he himself is a real and true "nationalist-socialist", and even a vulgar Great-Russian bully)."³ He didn't hesitate, moreover, to appoint the People's Commissar for Nationalities: "I think that Stalin's haste and his infatuation with pure administration, together with his spite against the notorious "nationalist-socialism"."⁴ Going back to the Georgian affair, he insists: "the political responsibility for all this truly Great-Russian nationalist campaign must, of course, be laid on Stalin and Dzerzhinsky." As we know, the conclusion of the "Lenin's testament" was the proposal to replace Stalin as the head of the General Secretariat of the Party. It was too late, alas...

Stalin's approach was fundamentally statist and bureaucratic – strengthening the apparatus, centralizing the state, reaching an administrative unification – Lenin was above all concerned with the international range of Soviet politics: "the harm that can result to our

state from a lack of unification between the national apparatuses and the Russian apparatus is infinitely less than that which will be done not only to us, but to the whole International, and to the hundreds of millions of the peoples of Asia, which is destined to follow us on to the stage of history in the near future.” Nothing would be as dangerous for the world revolution as “when we ourselves lapse, even if only in trifles, into imperialist attitudes towards oppressed nationalities, thus undermining all our principled sincerity, all our principled defence of the struggle against imperialism.”

A new stroke in early 1923 would immobilize Lenin and thus would remove the main obstacle for Stalin’s control over the party apparatus.

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Beyond the mere conflict with Stalin, Lenin’s reflections on the right of the people to self-determination remain a precious compass for defining an internationalist orientation in the era of national conflicts and the national liberation struggles of “stateless” peoples of our time, such as the Palestinians or the Kurds. State partition is a right, but, as Lenin insisted, it is not the only alternative. A free confederation of peoples could be a democratic solution. This is what the Kurdish liberation movement led by the Kurdistan’s Workers Party is proposing, by taking up Abdullah Öcalan’s proposal for a Plurinational Democratic Confederation.

The dream of Lenin for a free Union of Socialist Republics did not last very long, it was transformed into a dark bureaucratic dictatorship by Stalin. But it remains a reference, an example of what could be built together, in a socialist revolutionary process. People united in a common political space.

1 Putin 2022

2 Ibid

3 Lenin 1922

4 Ibid.

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