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ON SELF-DETERMINATION

In the light of the events in Czechoslovakia the author considers the meaning of the right to self-determination.

No one can discredit revolutionary Social-Democracy as long as it does not discredit itself.


Self-determination means that only the nation itself has the right to determine its destiny; no-one has the right forcibly to interfere in the life of the nation.

Stalin: *Marxism and the National Question*, 1913.

IN COMPARISON with the many current events highlighting the brutality, lawlessness and violent usurpation of the rights of nations and defenceless peoples characteristic of modern capitalism, the almost bloodless Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia could appear insignificant. Yet it may ultimately prove to be of as great concern to socialists as any other contemporary event, for it marked a clear departure from long-established marxist principles concerning the relations between nations and especially between socialist countries.

No justification of the occupation of socialist Czechoslovakia by the armed forces of the USSR and four other socialist states has yet been attempted in terms acceptable to marxists. The right of all nations to self-determination has been an established marxist principle for many years. True, as with other principles, a particular combination of circumstances may arise when greater principles, such as the fate of the world socialist movement for a while take precedence over it. But the situation must be demonstrably very grave indeed for this to be permissible. The early Soviet governments, for example, did not intervene to enforce socialism in such former parts of the Russian Empire as Finland or Poland.

Nowhere yet has any substantial evidence been produced that the situation in Czechoslovakia did in fact threaten the very survival of the socialist community of nations so as to warrant intervention by armed force to impose policies on the Czechoslovak Government and Party running counter to the socialist policies adopted by them.
Such evidence would have to be very weighty indeed to convince the generations of Communists in all countries taught to believe in the complete independence and equality of all socialist states and the impossibility of war between them.

These concepts derive directly from the Communist principle of self-determination for all nations, the essentials of which were argued out theoretically in the Russian Social Democratic Party, under Lenin’s leadership, before the Russian Revolution and applied in the building of the multi-national USSR and in the defining of its relations with and attitudes to all other nations and peoples. Far from diminishing in importance, as the “leftists” who argued with Lenin predicted it would, the “national question” has become much more complicated and serious in the years since the 1917 Revolution first opened the way to its solution.

In the period between the two world wars, when the nations formerly contained within the Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian Empires began to work out their own destinies, the main English colonies, of predominantly European descent achieved a measure of independence, and the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America developed powerful movements for national independence, a host of new aspects of the general problem arose. After the Second World War, the emergence of a number of new socialist countries and the achievement of political independence of dozens of former colonies complicated the question immeasurably. In “Western” countries such as Britain and the USA, where Lenin had thought the national question settled, the growth of the Welsh, Scottish, Negro and other movements has introduced new features.

Marxist thinking did not keep pace with this vast, changing reality. There was no lack of practical responses to particular situations (e.g., by the Communist International and its main component, the USSR, in the ’20’s and ’30’s). But all too frequently—as recent, somewhat sketchy analyses have shown—these responses were conditioned by the subordination of marxist theory and principle to the apparent tactical needs of the moment, which increasingly characterised Soviet marxism in the years of Stalin’s ascendancy and power, when the Short History of the CPSU (B) which gives scant attention to this problem, was the main source of marxist studies in most Soviet schools. Most of the recognised marxists outside the Soviet Union followed the Soviet pattern or else lost their influence, and often lost heart as well.

Stalin’s positive contributions to the solution of the national question were, from the very beginning, vitiated by his obsession with “getting things done” in a hurry and justifying impermissible behaviour under the pretext that the solution of major problems
of building the USSR required the overriding of secondary questions, among which he included the rights of nationalities. Lenin called attention to this basic defect in Stalin in his famous "Testament" — the notes dictated for his "Letter to the Congress" at the end of 1922 which was, unfortunately, only read out to the delegations to the 18th Congress in May 1924 and not published until 1956. (It is contained in Vol. 36 of Lenin's Collected Works, pp.593-611.)

In this Letter, after expressing doubts as to whether Stalin would always be capable of using his authority with caution, and suggesting his replacement as Secretary General, Lenin voiced "the greatest apprehensions" about the treatment of the Caucasian nationalities by Stalin, Dzerzhinsky and Orjonikidze. Querying whether enough care had been taken "to provide the non-Russians with a real safeguard against the truly Russian bully", he said:

I think that Stalin's haste and his infatuation with pure administration, together with his spite against the notorious "nationalist socialism" played a fatal role here. In politics, spite generally plays the basest of roles.

He went on to elaborate his views on how internationalism should be understood, distinguishing between the nationalism of an oppressor nation and that of an oppressed nation, the nationalism of a big nation and that of a small nation:

Internationalism on the part of oppressors or 'great' nations as they are called (though they are great only in their violence, only great as bullies) must consist not only in the observance of the formal equality of nations but even in an inequality of the oppressor nation, the great nation, that must make up for the inequality which obtains in actual practice. . .

. . . In one way or another, by one's attitude or by concessions, it is necessary to compensate the non-Russians for the lack of trust, for the suspicion and the insults to which the government of the "dominant" nation subjected them in the past.

He stressed the need to maintain and strengthen the union of socialist republics, but warned that any harm that could result to the USSR 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 . . . by the slightest crudity or injustice towards our own non-Russian nationalities.

He was continuing here, in the most difficult actuality of the building of socialism in the multi-national USSR, the fundamental approach to the national question which had been hammered out by the Russian Social Democrats throughout their history, and especially in 1903, 1913 and 1916. All this argument is worth restudying.

In these discussions, especially in "A Caricature of Marxism" (written in 1916 but not published until 1924) Lenin had main-
tained consistently (in argument with "leftists" who scorned the immediate struggle for democratic rights and cried "down with the frontiers" in the simplistic belief that "the socialist revolution would solve everything") that the road to socialism lay through the struggle for democracy under capitalism and that "democracy in the national question means the self-determination of nations."

Attacking the "left" theory that "self-determination is impossible under capitalism and superfluous under socialism", he said:

From the theoretical standpoint, that view is nonsensical, from the practical political standpoint it is chauvinistic. It fails to appreciate the significance of democracy. For socialism is impossible without democracy because (1) the proletariat cannot perform the socialist revolution unless it prepares for it by the struggle for democracy; (2) victorious socialism cannot consolidate its victory and bring humanity to the withering away of the state without implementing full democracy. To claim that self-determination is superfluous under socialism is therefore just as nonsensical and just as hopelessly confusing as to claim that democracy is superfluous under socialism. ("A Caricature of Marxism and Imperialist Economism". Collected Works, Vol. 23, pp.74-5.)

Today, fifty-one years after the Russian Revolution, Soviet democracy, both internally and in its relations with others is still defective. No unbiased observer can doubt that a great and viable socialist system has been built in the USSR or that open manifestations of chauvinism, so common in capitalist countries, have largely been eliminated. But neither can any socialist fail to be perturbed at the fact that, despite the enormous strength of the Soviet system, there are still severe limitations on freedom of expression, restricted and carefully edited information in the mass media and paternalist attitudes among some officials to foreign countries and experiences — including those of other socialist countries and Communist Parties. These basic faults in Soviet democracy cannot be excused merely by reference to the difficulties of the historical development of the USSR, enormous though these have been. To adopt a form of expression popular with Soviet publicists these days: the defects of Soviet democracy are not just the internal affair of the Soviet Union. They are the affair of all communists, for they affect the whole present and future of the world socialist movement.

Though the Soviet Union is rightly regarded as a model of a multi-national state, it is still not a perfect model. "Crude violations of the basic leninist principles of the nationality policy" within the Soviet Union were reported to the 20th Congress of the CPSU by Khrushchev in 1956 and he revealed that the conflict between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia had been "artificially blown up". "The Yugoslav affair", he said, "contained no problems which could not have been solved through Party discussions among comrades".

Measures were adopted to prevent the recurrence of violations
of the rights of constituent parts of the USSR and between it and other socialist countries. In October 1956, the Central Committee of the CPSU declared that the foundation of the foreign relations of the USSR always had been and remained the policy of peaceful coexistence, friendship and cooperation between all States.

"This policy," it said, "finds its most profound and consistent expression in the relations between the socialist countries" which, it asserted, "can build up their relations only on principles of complete equality, respect for territorial integrity, state independence and sovereignty and non-intervention in each other's internal affairs."

This concept was repeated in the 1957 Budapest declaration and the 1960 Statement of 81 Parties, in 1961 at the 22nd and in 1966 at the 23rd Congress of the CPSU.

The occupation of Czechoslovakia has not only cast a shadow on the sincerity of all these declarations of principle — it has also demonstrated the necessity for re-examining the past. Denigration of Stalin, Beria, Molotov or Khrushchov were never satisfactory "explanations" for marxists, but most believed or hoped that the mistakes of the past would never recur, that their causes had been or were being eliminated. Now a continuity of error is revealed and its basic sources must be investigated and properly analysed.

Such an analysis by marxists is prompted not by "anti-Soviet" sentiments, nor does it result from being "misled by imperialist propaganda" as a Pravda commentator asserted recently. On the contrary, the interests of the Soviet Union itself demand it, and it is essential for the further progress of the world communist movement, of which the USSR remains the strongest component. The need for such an analysis, in this spirit, was expressed by Palmiro Togliatti in his last "memorandum", published in Pravda in September 1964 after it had been printed in Italy:

Generally speaking, it is believed that the problem of the origin of the Stalin personality cult has not been solved up till now and that no explanation has been furnished as to how it became possible at all.

The problem attracting the greatest attention — this refers to the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries — is, however, the problem of overcoming the regime of restricting and suppressing democratic and personal freedoms which was introduced by Stalin...

The general impression is that of a slowness and resistance in returning to the Leninist norms that ensured within the Party and outside of it a wide liberty of expression and debate in culture, art and also in politics. This slowness and this resistance are difficult for us to explain, above all in the present conditions when there is no longer capitalist encirclement and economic reconstruction has had tremendous successes.

Unfortunately, the "slowness and resistance" which troubled Togliatti have not been overcome in the USSR and it is pretty clear that the main crime of the Czechoslovak Party has, in the eyes of Soviet leaders, been their determination to take the bold
step of abolishing the restrictions on democracy which had caused an alarming slowdown of progress and widespread discontent among the Czech and Slovak peoples and in their Party.

Soviet explanations of the reasons which prompted the armed violation of oft-declared principles and in particular of the 19-days-old Bratislava Agreement are voluminous, various, contradictory and, above all, unconvincing. Imminent danger of imperialist intervention or internal counter-revolution can be discounted. The highly competent Czechoslovak armed forces were never asked to act and, in any event, the occupation proved that assistance could have been obtained in a matter of hours, if needed.

The alleged weakness of the Czechoslovak Party and Government were denied, in practice, by the amazing, disciplined attitude of passive resistance adopted by the nation at the call of its leaders. The alleged call for assistance by Czechoslovak Party and Government leaders has been discredited by the facts that not a single name has yet been mentioned and that the legitimate leaders of the Party and Government are obviously not the seekers but the victims of this “assistance”.

Among the Soviet articles, one by I. Sidelnikov in Pravda (August 29) perhaps gives the clearest clue as to their real fears.

“The facts show,” he says (what facts?) “that in Czechoslovakia reactionary, anti-socialist forces, under the cover of slogans of ‘democratisation’ and ‘liberalisation’, gradually, step by step, led the matter up to the undermining of the guiding role of the working class and its Communist Party. They rocked the foundations of the political system.”

Even if this were true, would it justify unheralded incursion? But it is not true. Since the beginning of this year, and especially since the wide circulation of the Czechoslovak Party’s Action Program in April, new life and vigor had been apparent in Czechoslovakia, new confidence in the working class and Communist Party, new faith in socialism and in the position of Czechoslovakia as part of the socialist world. Democracy, which Lenin considered essential to socialism and which is clearly the burning question for the socialist movement everywhere, especially in the developed countries of the modern world, was the mainspring of the new spirit of confidence characterising socialist Czechoslovakia before the occupation.

It is surely not possible that significant elements, at least, of the Soviet and other Warsaw Pact leaderships are still unaware of, or indifferent to, the enormous and lasting negative effects of this action. At one stroke it damaged the image of these nations as leading forces in the world socialist movement and as architects of the policy of peaceful coexistence. In dealing a heavy blow to
the generations-old Czechoslovak friendship for and confidence in
the Soviet Union, it not only shocked communists and other pro­
gresses throughout the world. It also gave an unexpected bonus
to extreme right, militarist elements throughout the capitalist
world, especially in West Germany and the USA, breathing new
life into the moribund NATO and other warlike imperialist
institutions and treaties. It constituted a major setback to the
developing process of trust and common action between the com­
munists and other forces of the left in country after country, and
revived dying fears that the communists were “not to be trusted”.
The Swedish elections were the first dramatic proof of this. Above
all, by striking right at the heart of a major principle of socialism
—the right of all nations to self-determination—it increased the
mistrust between peoples on which imperialism thrives.

Analysis of the root causes cannot be avoided. The purpose
of such analysis should by no means be to gleefully drag into
the open every error made in the building of Soviet Socialism,
let alone to provide more fuel for the enemies of socialism. It
should, I think, be undertaken in the spirit of the Czechoslovak
Party’s Action Program, towards the end of which its authors say:
We are not taking the measures outlined to make any concessions to our
ideals—let alone to our opponents. On the contrary, we are convinced that
they will help us to get rid of the burden which for years provided many
advantages for the opponent by restricting, reducing and paralysing the effi­
ciency of the socialist idea, the attractiveness of the socialist example.