

The USSR, a nationless federation of nations: The most adequate form for the transition to socialism¹

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The title of this Conference poses an alternative in the form of a question: “Soviet Union: An Alternative of the Past, or a Strategic Project for the Future?” The contention of my report is that the Soviet Union is in many ways a strategic project for the future. I will only look at one facet of this contention in the quarter of an hour allotted to us: I will try to show, in a necessarily schematic manner in the short time I have, that the *special national form* this state took, of a decidedly dialectical character, was the most adequate form for the transition to socialism in the past and will remain so in the future.

In the process I will defend the idea that the USSR as a state form constituted a revolutionary rupture with respect to the state form of the nation-state in the modern era. It is the first state in the modern era, and the only one so far, that does not bear

¹ This is the verbatim text (except for the next footnote) of the presentation made by the author to the Conference “Soviet Union: An Alternative of the Past, or a Strategic Project for the Future?”, held on 12-13 November 2021 in Leningrad (St. Petersburg), organised by the National Library of Russia, Plekhanov House, and the Association for Marxist Social Sciences.

the name of a nation or at least a geographic location that later in the historical process became the name of a nation. Of the second type, the most salient instance is the United States of America. The Soviet state had no such national belonging in its outward appearance, which makes it exceptional in the modern nation-state system. It is my contention that this already made the proletariat “itself national, but not in the bourgeois sense of the word” in the terms that Marx and Engels characterised the situation of the proletariat within the context of the post-revolutionary proletarian state in the Communist Manifesto.

This entirely new type of state is the product of the genius of Lenin and he had to fight his last battle in order to give this special form to the Soviet state as it took shape in the course of 1922. It turned out to be his last victory. However, developments in the rest of the 20th century were to deprive this special state of its great potentialities. And, to this day, very few Marxists realise how special and significant this special state form was and is.

Because the USSR was, in the special form in which it was born, a brainchild of Lenin, I will take it up here as an outgrowth of the very special treatment given by Lenin to the national question. I contend that Lenin’s approach to the national question was original through and through, in certain ways even unique among Marxists. It has still not been comprehended fully.

I now pass on to a number of propositions, necessarily schematic in form, though the entire affair has a thoroughly dialectical character.

Proposition I. The national question assumes an entirely different content in Lenin compared to other Marxists. For Marx, a correct treatment of the delicate question of the relation between nations, especially when there is a clear relationship of oppression between nations, was a prerequisite for the successful accomplishment of the proletarian revolution. Witness his approach to the Irish question and his insistence that the English revolution is conditional upon the national emancipation of the Irish. For later Marxists, the national question was much *less* than this: it was, for a majority, simply a question that belonged to the universe of bourgeois democratic rights. Lenin never denied this aspect of the question, but especially during the Great War, more precisely in three of his works published in 1916, he situated the national question more and more within the framework of the process of socialist construction, i.e. of the transition from capitalist society to socialism. We will clarify below which three works these are.

Proposition II. This found its expression, from 1916 until his death, in the question “how will nations merge and fuse?” and as a corollary “how will national oppression be overcome?” For the overwhelming majority of Marxists, interest in the national question implied an analysis of the preconditions of the rise of the nation as a modern phenomenon, its role in the dissolution of feudalism and the rise of capitalism, and its transcendence as a result of the formation of a world economy. Lenin refused the *automatism* of most Marxists on this question of transcendence. Here is what he said in his controversy with Pyatakov and Bukharin in his *Imperialist Economism and a Caricature of Marxism* of 1916, defending the right of nations to self-determination:

... Kievsky bypasses the central question, that belongs to his special subject,

namely, *how* will we Social-Democrats abolish national oppression? ... This leaves only one single argument: the socialist revolution will solve everything! ... The economic revolution will create the necessary prerequisites for eliminating *all* types of political oppression. Precisely for that reason it is illogical and incorrect to reduce everything to the economic revolution, for the question is: *how* to eliminate national oppression? ... is not negation of the *right* to form a national state negation of equality? Of course it is. And consistent, i.e., socialist, democrats proclaim, formulate and will implement this right, without which there is no path to complete, voluntary rapprochement and merging of nations. [Emphasis by Lenin himself]

Proposition III. Lenin's program for the voluntary merging and fusing of nations in the transition to socialism, especially under the conditions of the structural relationship of oppression, consisted of three elements:

(1) The right of nations to self-determination, which is usually the only element that is brought to the fore at the expense of others. Even this well-worn element takes on a different aspect now, since it is not only a principle of democratic rights *under bourgeois democracy* as it is in other Marxists, but a principle that regulates the relationship of nations *in the period of transition to socialism*. This is what he said in his "The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination (Theses)" of 1916:

Just as mankind can achieve the abolition of classes only by passing through the transition period of the dictatorship of the oppressed class, so mankind can achieve the inevitable merging of nations only by passing through the transition period of complete liberation of all the oppressed nations, i.e., their freedom to secede.

(2) Federalism as the form of the bonds between the different nations that come together in a socialist commonwealth. This, let it be added, is a late addition to Lenin's arsenal, since in his earlier writings he had sternly advocated a unitary structure after the right of secession was foregone. This choice derived from reasons of efficiency brought by economic centralisation.

(3) Real, not formal, equality. On this question of the institution of a real equality between nations and not merely lip service to equality, Lenin's clearest formulation is in his 1922 text, written in accompaniment to his struggle for the formation of the USSR, the rightly famous "The Question of Nationalities or 'Autonomisation'":

... an abstract presentation of the question of nationalism in general is of no use at all. ... we, nationals of a big nation, have nearly always been guilty, in historic practice, of an infinite number of cases of violence; ... That is why 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. Anybody who does not understand this has not grasped the real proletarian attitude to the national question, he is still essentially petty bourgeois in his point of view and is, therefore, sure to descend to the bourgeois point of view.

It should be crystal clear to anyone that this is “positive discrimination” *avant la lettre*. It refers to the creation of special circumstances so that the oppressed nations can find the possibility of developing their national attributes after this has been denied them for decades or centuries.

Proposition IV. All these principles were put into practice, but only after an exhausting battle waged against the representatives of Great Russian chauvinism, represented then by Stalin, Ordjonikidze and Djezinsky (ironically all three of them non-Russians by birth). The project, advocated by Stalin, to assimilate Ukraine, Belarus, and Transcaucasia after Sovietisation into the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, i.e under a *Russian state*, was defeated by Lenin’s alternative in which Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and the Transcaucasian union came together *on equal terms* under the umbrella of the USSR, which was no longer a Russian state, but one that belonged to all the nations that constituted it. Many other Soviet Socialist Republics were later to join this federation on an equal basis, such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in 1924, Tajikistan in 1929, and Kazakhstan in 1939. This was the last great victory won by Lenin at his deathbed.

Proposition V. By the same token, Lenin established the first state in the modern era that does not bear the name of a nation or even a geographic space and thus does not belong to such a nation. So, in its outward appearance this is a *nationless state par excellence*. But since it immediately becomes, in dialectical contradiction with this characteristic, a nation-state among others in a world of what are otherwise many nation-states, the proletariat becomes “the nation” reconstructing the state, precisely in the meaning given to this turn of the phrase in the Communist Manifesto, already quoted above.

Proposition VI. Outwardly nationless, the USSR is a unity of many nations *par excellence* inwardly. It is not based on a denial of the very real existence of nations and nationalities. On the contrary, the quest for real rather than formal equality results in a full-scale spectrum of policies that are designed to make the nations that make up the *Soyuz* (the Union) flourish as they never have. This is the policy of “*korenizatsya*” that has been the dialectical opposite of the nationlessness of the Union outwardly.

Proposition VII. Spectacular as all that has been said so far of the USSR is, this is not all. This state was designed by Lenin as the node, the central nucleus, which would be amplified and spread with the new future victories of the world revolution. This is very clearly enunciated in the resolution “Theses on the National and Colonial Questions” presented by Lenin to the II. Congress of the Communist International and adopted unanimously, except for three abstentions. Unfortunately, I do not have the time to analyse that resolution at length and quote from it. Let me simply say that that resolution has been misread and misrepresented for a full century, most of the time deliberately to hide from the younger generations Lenin’s vision of socialism. It was the Comintern’s programme in its early years that future workers’ states would join the federation called the USSR, all the more with ease of mind since this was a union without the hegemony of any single nation. This was Lenin’s genius. Of course, not China, nor Yugoslavia, nor Vietnam, nor others ever did. To enquire into the reasons really would take us to some of the most important

reasons that led to the dissolution of the USSR and, indeed, of the 20th century socialist experience almost as a whole.²

Proposition VIII. If the proletariat and socialism have a future, the USSR has a future full of promise and not only in its original home, the vast geography that had once been Tsarist Russia, but everywhere around the world. *In this sense* the future belongs to the Soviet Union all around the earth.

² A word of caution. A great part of the blame is to be laid at the door of the Stalinist bureaucratic orientation of the Soviet government since the Great Russian nationalist orientation returned to the Soviet Union under the bureaucracy through the back door. However, it is a notable fact that the nations organised at all levels of the USSR felt federalism and *korenizatsya* so close to their hearts that, despite blatant violations of the rights of many nations during the Second World War, the inner functioning of the Soviet Union proved quite resilient up until the very end. This is a topic that has to be studied seriously and therefore has been abstracted from in this brief presentation.

The Marxist interpretation of the Erdoğan phenomenon now in Farsi, after English and Turkish!

The Neoliberal Landscape and the Rise of Islamist Capital in Turkey was edited by Neşecan Balkan, Erol Balkan and Ahmet Öncü and first published by Bergahn Books, USA, in hardback



The Neoliberal Landscape and the Rise of Islamist Capital in Turkey



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format in 2015 and paperback format in 2017. It was immediately translated into Turkish and published by Yordam Kitap in 2016. Some of the articles were written by members of the Editorial Board of our journal, namely Burak Gürel, Sungur Savran, Kurtar Tanyılmaz, and Özgür Öztürk. The book has now been translated into Farsi by Aidin Akhavan and published by Agah Publishers in Tehran, with a new Preface prepared specially for the Farsi edition, bringing the developments up to date.

From the “Preface to the Farsi Edition”

“The history of the AKP and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in power is a story of deception and misjudgement on a colossal scale for mainstream bourgeois thinking internationally and a certain brand of left-wing thinking in Turkey itself... It was not only the Western world that succumbed to the temptation of taking the ruse of the AKP seriously... For all political moderates of the Middle East living under authoritarian regimes, Erdoğan seemed to embody just the right dose between alliance with the West and loyalty to Islamic tradition... This was among the ruling classes and the intelligentsia... Fed up with the servile attitude of Arab leaders towards US policy in the Middle East and their total capitulation before Israel, the masses yearned for a leader like Erdoğan... As the title of the original English edition, *The Neoliberal Environment and the Rise of Islamist Capital in Turkey*, makes clear, the dominant view that permeates the articles brought together in this book presents the AKP as the political instrument for the rise of a new, Islamist fraction of the ruling classes in Turkey within the overall neoliberal environment of the early 21st century. Its historic mission had nothing to do with establishing democracy in Turkey.”