

Two letters on the national question (II)

David North
10 April 1991

This is the first of two letters on the national question written by David North in January and April 1991. The first letter is available [here](#).

Dear Comrade Krupsky:

The disintegration of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the terminal crisis of the bureaucratic dictatorship in the USSR has provoked, as you indicate in your letter, a resurgence of nationalism. It is hardly surprising that after decades of repression at the hands of the Stalinist autocrats, the Ukrainians, Georgians, Moldavians, Azerbaijanis and the other oppressed nationalities are striving to throw off the shackles of the Kremlin.

However, there exists two irreconcilably antagonistic approaches to the struggle for self-determination: 1) a nationalist-chauvinist approach that demands, in the course of fighting for the rights of one nation, the “right” to subjugate the minority populations living within the state borders of the “liberated” majority; or 2) the internationalist approach, based on the program of world socialist revolution, which seeks to realize the liberation of all oppressed nations through the unification of the toilers of all countries.

Only the second approach offers a viable solution to problem of national oppression which is historically-inseparable from the origins, development and putrefaction of the capitalist nation-state system.

Examined superficially, it may appear that the eruption of nationalism in the USSR and in Eastern Europe testifies to the failure of the “socialist” solution. But as in all other fundamental issues, the policies of the Soviet bureaucracy in relation to the national question violated the revolutionary-internationalist principles espoused by the Bolsheviks. The adoption of the reactionary theory of “socialism in one country” by Stalin and Bukharin in 1924 paved the way for the practical repudiation of socialist internationalism in all spheres of policy and practice.

As far back as 1927, Trotsky and the Left Opposition subjected the Stalinist regime's policy on the national question to a withering criticism and noted its harmful consequences:

Bureaucratism, sustained by the spirit of Great-Power jingoism, has succeeded in transforming Soviet centralization into a source of quarrels as to the allotment of official positions among the nationalities (the Transcaucasian Federation). It has spoiled the relations between the center and the outlying areas. It has reduced to nothing, as a matter of actual fact, the significance of the Society of Nationalities. It has carried out bureaucratic guardianship over the autonomous republics to the point of depriving the right to settle land disputes between the local and Russian population. To the present day this Great-Power jingoism, especially as it expresses itself through the State machinery, remains the chief enemy to the drawing together and unity of the workers of different nationalities. [*The Platform of the Joint Opposition 1927*, New Park, p. 54]

In the aftermath of World War II, the Stalinists subordinated the interests of the workers and peasants of Eastern Europe to the pragmatic considerations of Soviet *realpolitik*, i.e., the Kremlin's cynical deals with world imperialism. They artificially suppressed, rather than resolved, the smoldering national issues of Eastern Europe and the Balkans which had played so prominent a role in the preparation of World Wars I and II. It is especially significant that the Kremlin never sought to integrate the regions of Eastern Europe and the Balkans into a single harmonious economic unit within the framework of the USSR. Instead, it preserved, with only a few cosmetic alterations of the disputed borders, the old reactionary nation-state system that had been created by imperialism in the late 19th and first quarter of the 20th centuries.

The Soviet and East European economies —crippled by disruptive bureaucratic mismanagement and their isolation from the resources of the world market and international division of labor —were unable to satisfy on a democratic basis the material requirements of the people living within their vast geographic domain. Despite the lip-service paid by

the bureaucracy to the “fraternal solidarity” of the Soviet and East European peoples, the struggle over the allocation of scarce resources remained a constant source of enmity among different national and ethnic groups.

Now, as the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe move toward the restoration of capitalism, the national and even religious antagonisms must assume an even more bitter form. From the standpoint of the petty-bourgeois nationalists, chauvinism is a means of breaking down the class consciousness of the working class and establishing their own political domination. Moreover, chauvinism serves the needs of an economic policy which is aimed at attracting imperialist investment in their own national entity. Another important element in the eruption of chauvinism is the machinations of the imperialists, who skillfully exploit national and ethnic rivalries to further their own interests.

It must be stressed that the resurgence of malignant nationalism is by no means confined to Eastern Europe and the USSR. This is very much an international phenomenon which reflects the intensifying economic and political crisis of the world imperialist system. The growing trade rivalries between the major capitalist countries produce inter-state and intra-state antagonisms which express themselves in crude outbursts of chauvinism. Canada, for example, which might have seemed to be the most settled of all capitalist states, now confronts a bitter split between its English-speaking and French-speaking sections that might well lead to a national collapse and civil war! At the same time, the worsening struggle for markets, raw materials and sources of cheap labor are leading rapidly to a break-down of cordial relations between the United States, Europe and Japan. An indication of the new political climate between the United States and its chief economic rival is given by the title of a new book: *The Coming War with Japan*.

To arrive at a more profound understanding of the danger of chauvinism in the present world situation, it is useful to recall words written by Leon Trotsky just five years before the outbreak of World War II:

The national state created by capitalism in the struggle with the sectionalism of the Middle Ages became the classical arena of capitalism. But no sooner did it take shape than it became a break upon economic and cultural development. The contradiction between the productive forces and the framework of the national state, in conjunction with the principal contradiction — between the productive forces and the private ownership of the means of production— make the crisis of capitalism that of the world social system...

The defense of the national state, first of all in Balkanized Europe — the cradle of the national state —is in the full sense of the word, a *reactionary task*. The national state with its borders, passports, monetary system, customs and the army for the protection of customs has become a frightful impediment to the economic and cultural development of humanity. The task of the proletariat is not the defense of the national state but its complete and final liquidation...

The working class is not indifferent to its *nation*. On the contrary, it is just because history places the fate of the nation into its hands that the working class refuses to entrust the work of national freedom and independence to imperialism, which ‘saves’ the nation only to subject it on the morrow to new mortal dangers for the sake of the interests of an insignificant minority of exploiters.” [“War and the Fourth International,” *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-34*, Pathfinder, pp. 304-05]

Judging from your letter, I suspect that you will agree with Trotsky's view that “The national problem merges everywhere with the social. Only the conquest of power by the world proletariat can assure a real and lasting freedom of development for all nations of our planet.” [Ibid., p. 306]

The Marxist program of genuine revolutionary internationalism, which the Stalinists betrayed so shamelessly and cynically, today assumes for the workers of the world a truly life-and-death character. But this program will not be realized without the patient and determined struggle to build the Fourth International as the mass party of the world proletariat. We hope that you will join our ranks in the fight to restore the traditions of revolutionary internationalism in the working class.

In conclusion, let me bring to your attention the plan of the International Committee of the Fourth International to hold an international conference against Imperialist War and Colonialism. It will take place in Berlin on November 16-17, 1991. We hope that it will be possible for you and your comrades to send a delegation to this important conference.

With internationalist greetings,

David North, on behalf of the editorial board of the *Bulletin of the Fourth International*



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