

MARXISM AND THE NATIONAL PROBLEM¹

By J. STALIN

[The following is the first section of an article by Comrade Stalin which was published from Vienna in January, 1913. It represents one of the most important contributions to the discussion on the general principles of the national problem that was taking place before the war. The present translation has been made directly from the Russian.]

I.—THE NATION.

WHAT is a nation? A nation is primarily a community, a definite community of people. It is not a racial or tribal community. The modern Italian nation was formed by Romans, Germans, Etruscans, Greeks, Arabs, &c. The French nation represents a mixture of Gauls, Romans, Britons, Germans, &c. The same is true of the Britishers, Germans and other nations which are composed of people of different races and tribes.

Thus a nation constitutes not a racial or a tribal, but an historically constituted people.

On the other hand, it is beyond doubt that the great States of Cyrus and Alexander could not be named nations though they were formed historically, formed out of different tribes and races. They were not nations, but accidental and loosely connected conglomerations of groups which split up and joined together depending upon the victories and defeats of this or that conqueror.

¹*Note by the Author in 1924.* The article "Marxism and the National Problem" reflects the period of the discussions on the principles of the national problem going on in the ranks of Russian Social Democracy during the epoch of feudal-tsarist reaction a year-and-a-half before the beginning of the imperialist war, during the epoch of the growth of the bourgeois democratic revolution in Russia. Two theories of the Nation were in conflict at that time and, corresponding to that, there were two National programmes, viz., the Austrian which was supported by the Bund and by the Mensheviks, and the Russian which was a Bolshevik programme. The reader will find a characterisation of both tendencies in the article. Subsequent events, particularly the imperialist war and the dissolution of Austria-Hungary into separate national States, has made obvious on which side was the truth. At the present time, when Springer and Bauer are confronted with the shattered fragments of their National programme, it can hardly be possible to doubt that history has pronounced judgment on the "Austrian School." Even the Bund has had to recognise that "the demand for national-cultural autonomy (i.e., of the Austrian National programme.—J.S.) put forward within the limits of the capitalist structure loses its meaning under the conditions of Socialist revolution. (Vide "11th Congress of the Bund," 1920.) The Bund does not suspect that thereby it has recognised, despairingly recognised, the untenability in principle of the theoretical bases of the Austrian National programme, the untenability in principle of the Austrian theory of the Nation.—J. Stalin.

Thus a nation is not a casual or ephemeral conglomeration, but a lasting community of people.

But not every lasting community creates a nation. Austria and Russia are also lasting communities, but no one will call them nations. What distinguishes national identity from State community? One of the distinguishing features is that national identity is impossible without a common language while to a State a common language is not necessary. The Czech nation in Austria and the Polish nation in Russia would be impossibilities without a common language, while the integrity of Russia and Austria is not disturbed by the existence of a number of languages within them. We refer, of course, to the languages used by the people rather than the official languages of the Government offices.

Thus, identity of language is one of the characteristic features of nations.

This does not, of course, mean that different nations always necessarily speak different languages or that all those speaking one language necessarily constitute one nation. A common language is necessary to each nation, but different languages are not necessary to different nations.

There is no one nation which at one and the same time speaks different languages, but this does not mean that there cannot be any two nations using one and the same language. Englishmen and North Americans speak one language but do not constitute one nation. The same is true of the Norwegians and Danes, of the English and Irish.

But why do not the Englishmen and North Americans constitute one nation in spite of the identity of their languages?

Primarily because they live not together but in different territories. A nation is formed only as a result of lasting and regular intercourse, as a result of the co-existence of people from generation to generation. But a persistent life in common is impossible without a common territory. Englishmen and Americans had once inhabited one territory, England, and constituted one nation. Later a section of the Englishmen emigrated to America and here, on the new territory, eventually formed a new American nation.

Different territories led to the formation of different nations.

Thus, identity of territory is another characteristic feature of a nation.

But this is not all. Identity of territory does not in itself create a nation. This requires, in addition, internal economic connections, welding together the different sections of a nation into a single whole.

There is no such connection between England and North America, and therefore they constitute two distinct nations. But the North Americans themselves would not deserve the name of a nation had not

the different parts of North America been bound up into an economic whole, thanks to the division of labour between them, to the development of railroads, &c.

Take Georgia, for instance. The Georgians of the pre-reform days lived on a common territory and spoke one language. Nevertheless, they did not, strictly speaking, constitute one nation, for being split up into a number of disconnected principalities, they did not lead a common economic life: waged for centuries wars against each other, ruining each other and inciting the Persians and Turks against each other. The ephemeral and accidental unification of the principalities which some successful King sometimes effected embraced at best the administrative circles and soon disintegrated again owing to the differences between the princes and the indifference of the peasants. Nor could this be otherwise in economically divided Georgia. Georgia as a nation developed only in the latter half of the XIX. century, when the downfall of serfdom and the growth of the economic life of the country, the development of roads, and the rise of capitalism, established a division of labour between the various districts of Georgia, completely shattered the economic isolation of the principalities and bound them together into a single whole.

The same must be said of the other nations which passed through the stage of feudalism and developed capitalism.

Thus, identity of economic life, economic contact, forms another characteristic feature of nations.

spiritual But even this is not all. In addition to the foregoing, it is necessary to take into consideration the peculiar spiritual characteristics of the people constituting a nation. Nations differ from each other not only by the conditions of their life, but also by spiritual characteristics which manifest themselves in the national culture. If England, North America and Ireland constitute three distinct nations despite identity of language, this is largely due to the peculiar psychology developed among them from generation to generation as a result of different conditions of existence.

Of course, psychology itself or, as it is otherwise called, the "national character," cannot be seized by an observer, but insofar as it manifests itself in a peculiarity of culture of the nation as a whole it is discernable and cannot be ignored.

Needless to say that the "national character" is nothing fixed once and for all, but changes together with the conditions of life; but inasmuch as it exists at any given moment, it leaves a definite imprint upon the face of the nation.

Thus, identity of psychology manifesting itself in a common culture is another of the characteristic features of a nation.

Now we have exhausted all the characteristics of a nation.

A nation is an historically developed lasting identity of language, territory, economic life, and psychology manifesting itself in identity of culture.

It goes without saying, of course, that a nation, like every other historical phenomenon is subject to the law of change, has its history, its beginning and end.

It must be emphasised that none of the above characteristics taken separately is sufficient to define a nation. Moreover, the absence even of one of these characteristics is sufficient for the nation to cease to be a nation.

It is possible to imagine people with a common national character who may still not constitute a single nation if they are economically separated, if they live on different territories or speak different languages. Such, for instance, are the Russian, Galician, American, Georgian mountain Jews, who do not, in our opinion, constitute a single nation.

It is possible to imagine people with a common territory and economic life who nevertheless do not constitute a single nation owing to differences in language and "national character." Such, for instance, are the Germans and Letts in the Baltic region.

Finally, the Norwegians and Danes speak one language but do not constitute a single nation owing to the absence of the other characteristics.

Only the existence of all the characteristics taken together produces a nation.

It may appear that the "national character" is not one of the characteristics but the sole essential characteristic of a nation, all the other characteristics representing only conditions for the development of the nation rather than its characteristics. This view-point is maintained by the well-known Austrian social democratic theoreticians of the national question, R. Springer, and particularly by O. Bauer.

Let us analyse their theory of the nation.²

According to Springer, "a nation is a union of similarly thinking and similarly speaking people. It is a cultural identity of a group of contemporaries which is not connected with country."

Thus, a union of like-minded people speaking one language, no matter how divided they may be from each other in space, no matter where they live, is a nation.

Bauer goes even further.

What is a nation? he asks. "Is it identity of language which combines people into a nation? But Englishmen and Irishmen . . . speak one

²*National Problems*, by A. Springer; page 43.

language without representing a single nation. Jews have no common language, but nevertheless constitute a nation.”³

What, then, is a nation ?

“ A nation is a relative identity of character.”⁴

But what is character, national character in this case ?

A national character is “ a sum of features distinguishing people of one nationality from people of another, a complex of physical and spiritual qualities which distinguishes one nation from another.”⁵

Bauer knows, of course, that a national character does not come down from heaven and he, therefore, adds : “ The character of people is determined by nothing else but their fate,” that “ a nation is nothing but an identity of fate,” which is in its turn determined “ by the conditions under which people produce the means of life and distribute the products of their labour.”⁶

Thus, we have come to the “ fullest ” definition of a nation according to Bauer. “ A nation is a complex of people connected by an identity of character based upon an identity of fate.”⁷

Thus, identity of national character is based on identity of fate, without a necessary connection with identity of territory, language or economic life.

But what then remains of the nation in such a case ? What national identity can there be among people who are economically disconnected, who live on different territories and speak different languages, from generation to generation ?

Bauer speaks of the Jews as a nation though they “ have no common language ”⁸; but what “ identity of fate ” and national connection is there, for instance, between the Georgian, Dagestan, Russian and American Jews, who are completely disunited, who live on different territories and speak different languages ?

The said Jews undoubtedly lead the same economic and political life respectively as the Georgians, Dagestanians, Americans, and live in the same cultural atmosphere as the latter ; this cannot but leave a definite impress upon their national character ; if there is anything common among them it is their religion, origin and some remnants of national character. All this is unquestionable. But is it possible seriously to maintain that petrified religious rites and some faint heritages of identical psychology affect the “ fate ” of the above-mentioned Jews more strongly

³Otto Bauer, *The National Question and Social Democracy* ; pages 1-2.

⁴Ibid ; page 6.

⁵Ibid ; page 2.

⁶Ibid ; pages 24-25.

⁷Otto Bauer, *The National Question and Social Democracy* ; page 139.

⁸Ibid. ; page 2.

than the vital social-economic and cultural environment? And it is only with this assumption that it is possible to speak of the Jews in general as a single nation.

What, then, distinguishes Bauer's nation from the mystic and self-sufficient "national spirit" of the spiritualists?

Bauer draws a sharp line between the "distinctive feature" of nations (the national character) and the "conditions" of their life. But what is the national character except the reflection of the conditions of life, an impress of the influences of the environment? How is it possible to be limited to the national character alone, isolating and separating it from the conditions which gave rise to it?

Further, what distinguished the English nation from the North American nation at the end of the XVIII. and beginning of the XIX. century when North America was still known as New England?

Not the national character, of course, for the North Americans were emigrants from England who took with them to America not only the English language but also the English national character and could not, of course, have lost it so fast, though under the conditions of the new life they naturally developed their own peculiar character. Still, despite this certain identity of character they constituted a distinct nation. Apparently, New England as a nation differed from England as a nation not by a special national character, or not so much by the national character as by distinct conditions of life.

Thus it is clear that in reality there is no single feature distinguishing a nation. There is only a sum of features under which, when nations are compared, either one (national character) or another (language) or a third (territory, economic conditions) appears in sharper relief. A nation constitutes a combination of all the characteristics taken together.

Bauer's point of view which regards the nation as identical with the national character removes the nation away from its basis and converts it into a sort of self-sufficient force. The result is not a living and acting nation but something mystical, invisible and other-worldly. For, I repeat, what sort of a Jewish nation is it that consists of Georgian, Dagestanian, Russian, American and other Jews, the members of which do not understand each other (for they speak different languages), live in different parts of the globe, never see each other, never act together, whether in times of peace or of war? No, it is not for such paper "nations" that the Social Democracy is working out its national programme. It can take into consideration only real, living nations which lead a common national life and are able to make themselves be reckoned with.

Bauer apparently confuses the nation, which constitutes an historical category, with the race which constitutes an ethnographic category.

However, Bauer himself seems to feel the weakness of his position. While definitely declaring the Jews to be a nation at the beginning of his book,⁹ Bauer corrects himself at the end stating that "the capitalist system makes it impossible for them (the Jews) to survive as a nation,"¹⁰ and assimilates them together with the other nations.

The reason appears to be that "the Jews have no isolated region for colonisation,"¹¹ while the Czechs, for instance, have such a territory, and according to Bauer, will survive as a nation.

In short, the reason lies in the absence of a common territory.

In arguing thus, Bauer wanted to say that national autonomy cannot be the demand of the European workers,¹² but he thereby overthrew his own theory which denies identity of territory as one of the characteristics of a nation.

But Bauer goes even further. At the beginning of his book he definitely declares that "the Jews have no common language, but nevertheless constitute a nation."¹³ But on page 130 he makes a change of front and declares just as definitely "unquestionably no nation is possible without a common language."

Bauer wanted to say that "language is a most important instrument of human intercourse,"¹⁴ but at the same time he involuntarily proved something which he did not mean to prove, namely, the untenability of his own theory of a nation, which denies the importance of identity of language.

Thus, does the theory which is sewn together by idealistic threads overthrow itself.

(To be continued.)

⁹Page 2 of his book.

¹⁰Ibid, page 389.

¹¹Ibid ; page 388.

¹²Ibid ; page 396.

¹³Ibid. ; page 2.

¹⁴Ibid. ; page 130.

The World of Labour

BURMA

The following Manifesto dealing with recent events in Burma has been issued by the British section of the International League against Imperialism.

The Torturing of Burma.

B RITISH Imperialist terror has fastened on Burma with bloody hands. In the war of extermination undertaken against starving peasants, it is admitted by Wedgwood Benn, the Labour Secretary of State for India, that probably over 1,000 "rebels" have been killed. This reluctant official admission is almost certainly a considerable understatement. At the same time the troops used suffer hardly a score of casualties. What can this imply but merciless slaughter of unarmed people.

Not content with this, British imperialism executes and jails its prisoners. Many have been deported for life to the Andaman Islands. On one day, May 9th, Reuter reported fifteen "rebels" sentenced to death and 56 sentenced to transportation for life. Can such blood lust be paralleled under the rule of even the most barbarous despotism?

And the war continues. The present garrison which is being reinforced by further troops from India consists of the East Kent Regiment (The Buffs) and Punjabi troops. Aeroplanes are also being used. The R.A.F. bombing squadron from Singapore has been employed to bomb the Burmese in the jungles.

The British Imperialist Press seeks to befog a plain economic situation by describing the origin and motives of the rebellion in Burma as "most obscure." Owing to the world fall in the price of rice and timber, the principal products of Burma, the agricultural workers and small farmers are starving, but despite the economic ruin of the people, the Burma military police, 10,000 strong with forty commissioned British officers, continue their work of extorting the heavy capitation-tax from the moneyless peasantry. The Burmese worker has to choose between arrest by the police for non-payment of taxes and being butchered by imperialism should he join with his fellows in the movement of revolt against alien rule and exploitation.

In addition to the military and police oppression the Viceroy, Irwin, who has since been rewarded with the Garter for his services to British imperialism, promulgated in Burma an ordinance on the lines of the Bengal Ordinance which provides power of arrest without warrant and trial without jury, while any individual addressing a public meeting in Burma is liable to arrest under Section 144 (A) of the Indian Penal Code.

The Nationalist organisation of the peasants and small farmers, the General Council of Burmese Associations, the leader of which was U. Soe Thein, whose