

The National Question - some basic principles

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Marxists are internationalists not nationalists.

Nationalism is a key element in bourgeois ideology. It is one of the ideological means, arguably in today's world *the main* ideological means, by which the capitalist class of all nations secures the compliance and even support of the working class and of the oppressed of all nations.

Like most such ideological phenomena, nationalism is not a fixed 'thing' or doctrine but rather a cluster of attitudes and propositions which are sometimes articulated, sometimes simply taken for granted, and frequently assumed to be 'obvious' and 'common sense'. These are some of the principal nationalist assumptions which combine in different proportions and with different emphases at different times in different formulations of nationalism.

1. A particular nation - 'our' nation, whether it is Ireland, America, Britain, Germany or wherever - is somehow 'best', superior to other nations, as in 'America is the greatest country on earth' or 'Britannia rules the waves!' or 'Deutschland uber alles!'.
2. One's national identity is one's most important or core identity, taking precedence over other identities such as class, gender, ethnicity, locality, occupation etc.
3. Nations, or the people of a given nation, are held to have certain definite national characteristics which are somehow 'in their blood' or their genes and which explain or shape national history rather than being a product of it. For example, the British are 'moderate' and given to compromise or Americans are 'freedom loving'. It should be noted that these characteristics are often positive as applied to one's own country and negative when applied to other countries, especially 'enemy' countries.

4. There is a common 'national' interest which unites all members of a given nation, and to which all 'sectional' interests (class, gender, ethnicity, locality etc.) should be subordinate: 'It is in the national interest for workers to exercise wage restraint' or 'We all have to make sacrifices in the national interest'.
5. In economic, political or even sporting conflicts with other nations it is a citizen's duty to support their 'own' country. This applies most forcibly in time of war when to behave otherwise is deemed a 'traitor'.
6. It is the prime job of the government and the state to represent the national interest and that involves putting the interests of the government's citizens first, before the interests of 'foreigners' as in 'Why are we giving so much in foreign aid when we have problems at home? We should look after our own first' or 'Irish/British/ French jobs for Irish/British/ French workers'.

Of these six assumptions listed here it is the last three that are most important politically and most pervasive (though all are widespread) and it should be noted that many people and, crucially, many politicians who would reject any claim of 'superiority' as crude and arrogant would nonetheless basically accept points 4-6. In particular the notion of a 'national interest' is accepted by virtually all 'mainstream' politicians and frames almost all current political debate.

One of the main reasons why nationalism is so ubiquitous and so powerful is that it reflects a central material fact about the modern world, namely that economic, social and political life actually is organised on the basis of nation states more or less everywhere across the globe. What the *ideology* of nationalism conceals is that this 'fact' is of recent origin: nationalism has a general tendency to project

the history of ‘the nation’ back to time immemorial, so naturalising it and legitimating it. Thus we hear of Ireland in the 10th century or Italy in 12th century as if we speaking of the same kind of entity as Ireland or Italy today when in there was no such thing as an Irish or Italian nation state or national consciousness at this time only Ireland or Italy as a geographical expression (like Scandinavia or South America today). In general, nation states in the modern sense only emerged with and as part of the development of capitalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie from about the 16th century onwards¹ and nationalism was from the outset a specifically **bourgeois** ideology.

In opposition to this bourgeois ideology Marxist internationalism rejects each of the six assumptions outlined above.

1. No nation (or ‘race’ or ‘people’ or ‘culture’) is inherently or innately superior to all or any others. Of course it is true that at particular moments in history particular states, or parts of the world are able to establish their economic, political and military dominance² but this is historically determined, has nothing to do with innate capacity and is invariably a temporary phenomenon. Thus Rome had a period of dominance (over part of the world) from about 100 BCE to 400 CE, China was in the lead about 1000CE, Britain in the 19th century and the USA in the 20th with China making a bid for leadership in the 21st.
2. Individual’s have multiple ‘identities’ or identifications - nation, gender, ethnicity, locality, family, religion, occupation, class and so on. Which identi-

fication predominates in people’s consciousness depends on circumstances and is the outcome of social and political struggle. Bourgeois nationalists fight for nation to predominate, socialists fight for class.

3. ‘National characteristics’ do exist but they are a product of history and are absolutely marginal compared to what people of different nationalities have in common. Moreover they are of next to no explanatory use in understanding history. Explanations of Irish resistance (say in 1916 or 1920) or Irish passivity (say in 2011) in terms of the ‘Irish character’ have no value any more than does the notion that the French are ‘always out on the streets’ (if only) or that Latin Americans go in for revolutions. A distinction must be made between any concept of inherent ‘national character’ and national traditions (including social memory) which are historically formed and do a play a certain role in shaping ongoing political struggles³.
4. Marxist internationalism rejects the idea of a common national interest. Any nation consists of different classes and the interests of any capitalist class, be it Irish, German or Russian, are fundamentally opposed to the interests of ‘their’ working class whom they systematically exploit. The concept of the ‘national interest’ serves to mask this exploitation and conflict of interests. When workers are asked to make sacrifices ‘in the national interest’ they are really being asked to make sacrifices to

¹For an excellent and wide ranging analysis of the development of nations and nationalism (along with much else besides) see Chris Harman, ‘The return of the national question’, *International Socialism* 56.

²As Marx pointed out these forms of dominance generally tend to go together and are also often accompanied by cultural hegemony.

³For example the role of the Great French Revolution in the social memory of the French people and the whole European left throughout the 19th century, or the role of the Lockout and the Easter Rising in the the consciousness of the Irish working class today. We should also remember Marx’s comment that The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

increase the bosses' profits. In a capitalist society the 'national interest' always means the interest of the capitalist class.

5. If, according to nationalism, the citizen's duty is to support their 'own' country i.e. their ruling class, the obligation of the socialist and internationalist is to support the working class and the oppressed of their own country and internationally. This applies especially to war and our attitude in and to wars depends on the progressive or reactionary character of the war from the standpoint of the working class.
6. In opposition to the nationalist argument that 'we' or 'our' government should look after 'our own' first - via immigration controls, 'Irish jobs for Irish workers' or any kind of discrimination against foreigners - the internationalist position is that 'our own' are the working people and oppressed of all countries. Hence Marx and Engels' slogan from the Communist Manifesto - Workers of the World Unite! - has always been the basic slogan of our whole movement.

If the material foundation of nationalism is the aforementioned fact that in the capitalist era 'economic, social and political life actually is organised on the basis of nation states', the foundation of internationalism is the deeper truth that, despite its organisation into competing nations, capitalism is ultimately an international system. Even at its beginning in the sixteenth century, the development of capitalism in Europe depended on a process of 'primitive capital accumulation' that was thoroughly global. As Marx described it in *Capital*:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in

mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation. On their heels treads the commercial war of the European nations, with the globe for a theatre. It begins with the revolt of the Netherlands from Spain, assumes giant dimensions in England's Anti-Jacobin War, and is still going on in the opium wars against China, &c.⁴

With the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th century and the onset of the imperialist era in the late 19th century this internationalisation of capitalist production was greatly intensified. Again, it was predicted and analysed with uncanny accuracy by Marx way back in 1848.

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of Reactionists, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all

⁴<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch31.htm>

civilised nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations

It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.⁵

The intense globalisation of the last three decades has fulfilled Marx's prediction virtually to the letter. Moreover the consequence of this international integration is the internationalisation of the phenomenon of crisis and recession to which capitalism is subject as was seen both in the great slump of the 1930s and the recession that began in 2008.

This in turn lends an international character to the struggle against capitalism. Clearly this is an uneven process in which national peculiarities and rhythms remain - for example the level of resistance has obviously been higher in Greece than it has in Ireland over the last few years. Nevertheless the class struggle goes through waves of advance and retreat that are fundamentally international.

Thus there was the 'age of revolution' comprising the American Revolution of 1774, the French Revolution of 1789, the Haitian and other slave revolts of 1791 and the '98 Re-

bellion in Ireland. Then there was 1848 with its revolutions in France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, parts of Italy, Poland, the campaign of the Chartists in Britain and the foundation of the Fenians in America, followed by a long period of capitalist expansion and political reaction. In the years leading up to the First World War came a period of workers' industrial revolt known as 'the Great Unrest' in Britain which included the rise of syndicalism in France, the Wobblies in America and the Lockout in Dublin. This was interrupted by the outbreak of the War but then the struggle resumed at a higher level with the Easter Rising of 1916, the Russian Revolution of 1917, The German Revolution of 1918-23, the Hungarian and Finnish Revolutions, the Italian 'biennio rosso' of 1919-20, the Irish War of Independence and much else.

The failure of this great revolutionary surge was then followed by a long period of international defeat culminating in the victories of fascism and Stalinism. The 1950s and 60s saw a long capitalist boom but as the boom started to falter the struggle revived especially in 1968 and after, with the May Events in France, the black and anti-Vietnam War movement in the US, the international student movement, the British industrial battles of 1972-74, the Irish Civil Rights struggle and the start of 'the troubles', the Chilean Popular Unity and so on. The 1980s and 90s - the age of Reagan, Thatcher and neo-liberalism - were generally right-wing but the current crisis has witnessed, since the end of 2010, a wave of revolt from Tunisia and Egypt to Spain and the Occupy Movement.

From the global nature of capitalism Marx and Engels at once realised that socialism could not be achieved in one country. In *The Principles of Communism* (1847), which was the first draft of the *Communist Manifesto*, Engels posed the question directly:

Will it be possible for this revolution to take place in one country alone?

⁵Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#007>

And answered

No. By creating the world market, big industry has already brought all the peoples of the Earth, and especially the civilized peoples, into such close relation with one another that none is independent of what happens to the others.⁶

Lenin reiterated the point on many occasions. For example in January 1918:

The final victory of socialism in a single country is of course impossible. Our contingent of workers and peasants which is upholding soviet power is one of the contingents of a great world army.⁷

And in November 1920 on the 3rd anniversary of the Revolution:

We knew at that time that our victory would be a lasting one only when our cause had triumphed the world over, and so when we began working for our cause we counted exclusively on the world revolution. We have always known and shall never forget that ours is an international cause, and until the revolution takes place in all lands, including the richest and most highly civilized ones, our victory will be only a half-victory, perhaps still less.⁸

Then the defense of internationalism and the goal of world revolution became the fundamental issue in Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism with its doctrine of 'socialism in one country' and in today's globalised world the

idea of being able to construct socialism in a single country is less plausible than ever.

For all these reasons the development of international solidarity, international socialist organization and the struggle against racism, nationalism and every prejudice which divides the working class is central to socialism.

National Oppression and National Liberation

Opposition to nationalism does not however mean that socialists are indifferent to issues of national oppression. On the contrary just as socialists have to be determined opponents of women's oppression, LGBT oppression, and religious oppression, so they must vigorously oppose all forms of national oppression. This gives rise to an apparent paradox. Historically the most important form of national oppression has been the denial of the right of nations or people to national independence or statehood. This has especially been the case in the numerous empires that have arisen with the development of capitalism. Spain, Portugal, Holland, Belgium, France, Russia, Germany, Austria, Japan, Italy, USA, Turkey etc and, above all, Britain amassed numerous colonies to whom they denied independence - India, Ireland, Kenya, Algeria, Vietnam, Nigeria, the West Indies, Angola, the Congo, Serbia, Georgia, to name but a few. If socialists, in their opposition to national oppression, support the liberation struggles of such nations or would-be nations are they not thereby supporting nationalism or at the very least compromising with it?

This was the argument made by the great Polish - German revolutionary socialist Rosa Luxemburg at the beginning of the 20th Century, especially in relation to Poland. At this time Poland was a colony of Russia but Luxemburg, who was profoundly internationalist, argued against supporting Polish inde-

⁶<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/11/prin-com.htm>

⁷Lenin, *Collected Works*, Moscow 1962, Vol 26. pp.470-1.

⁸As above, Vol.31 pp397-98. And Trotsky, of course, fought a life and death struggle over this question when Stalin in 1924 proposed, for the first time in the history of the Marxist movement, that socialism could be built in a single country.

pendence because she was convinced that the Polish nationalists were reactionary and anti-working class and that instead Polish workers should unite with their Russian brothers and sisters in the struggle against the Tsar. (This was at the time of the 1905 Revolution in Russia.) In contrast Lenin argued that it was essential for socialists to support the right of the oppressed nations within the Russian empire - Poland, Georgia, Latvia, Kazakhstan and many others - to self-determination including the right to secede if they wanted it.

Luxemburg thought this was a concession to nationalism and sowed illusions in the possibility of small nations to develop 'independently' within global capitalism. Lenin denied he was making any concession to nationalism and argued that support for the right to self-determination of oppressed nations was simply the application of democratic principle to the national question. Moreover he insisted it was precisely an **internationalist** duty because the international unification of the working class and of all peoples, which was the goal of socialism, could only be a voluntary unification. It could not be imposed by capitalism or imperialism. Lenin maintained that if socialists failed to oppose conquest, colonialism or the denial of the right to self-determination, they would become complicit in national oppression and cease to be internationalists.

Rosa Luxemburg was a great revolutionary socialist and committed internationalist but there is little doubt that history has proved Lenin right on this question. Everywhere it has existed imperialism has generated resistance in the form of national liberation movements which have played a hugely important and generally progressive role over the last 100 years. It is clear that socialists had to support the struggle of India, Ghana, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Ireland for national independence from the British Empire, of Algeria against French imperialism, of Vietnam against American imperialism, of Angola and Mozambique in relation to Portuguese imperi-

alism and so on. Lenin argued that revolts in the colonies and struggles for national liberation would objectively weaken the ruling class in the imperialist countries and thus assist the development of the revolution in those countries. This has been vindicated on a number of occasions: for example the resistance by the Vietnamese in the 1960s had a huge impact in developing resistance within the United States in terms of the black movement, the anti-war movement, and the student revolt - indeed it was a big factor in the revolts of the sixties internationally, including May '68 in Paris - and then in 1974 it was the national liberation movements in Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique which weakened the Portuguese fascist regime to the point where it was overthrown by the Portuguese Revolution.

But if anti-imperialism and support for national liberation has become widespread on the socialist left (as opposed to mainstream social democracy and Labourism which has generally been pro-imperialist)⁹ this has often brought with it a tendency for Marxists or socialists to merge with nationalism, or become nationalists themselves. This has particularly been the case in what used to be called the Third World but also applies to many western leftists who sympathise with Third World nationalism. Historically the main responsibility for this lay with Stalinism. After 1924 Stalin, in pursuit of socialism in one country, used the Communist International to turn the Communist parties into tools of Russian foreign policy. Instead of leading revolutions their job became to influence powerful allies into becoming 'friends' of the Soviet Union and help protect it against foreign intervention. In many cases these allies were nationalists of one kind or another and the nationalism started to rub off on the CPs themselves. Alongside this Stalinism adopted a 'stages theory' of revolution in all the underdeveloped countries according to which these countries were only ready for a 'national democratic' revolution in alliance with the 'patriotic bour-

⁹This has been the case ever since ever since most European social democrats supported the imperialist First World War in August 1914 .

geoisie'; only when this was completed was the struggle for socialism to begin.¹⁰ This reinforced the transformation of 'communists' or socialists into radical nationalists (as with Ho Chi Minh and the National Liberation Front in Vietnam or Fidel Castro in Cuba or left republicanism in Ireland).

To summarize: Marxists support the right of nations to self-determination and the national liberation struggles of oppressed nations but they do so **as internationalists** in order to assist the international unification of the working class and not as an end in itself.

Rogue Regimes and Terrorists

Put as an abstract question the right to national self-determination is one most of the left and many democrats would readily support. Moreover, to give some concrete examples, few people, if any, on the left would deny the right to independence of India, or Vietnam, or Cuba, or Ireland, or the right to majority rule in South Africa. One reason for this is that the leaderships of these national movements (Gandhi, Ho Chi Minh, Castro, Pearse and Connolly, Mandela) were widely seen as progressive and heroic figures; another is that the ideological tool used to discredit these movements, that they were 'communist', lost much of its power. Things can stand very differently where the national regime or movement concerned seems much less attractive or progressive, for example Gaddafi's regime in Libya or the Taliban's in Afghanistan.

The imperialists and their hired propagandists know this only too well. If they want to conquer, occupy, colonise or attack a country, for their own predatory reasons, they take care to demonise its 'regime' or leadership first. For a long time, outright racism was the main ideological weapon used for these purposes- the natives, you see, were 'childlike' or 'savages' unfit to rule themselves - then, as noted above, it was 'the threat of commu-

nism'. In recent years these motifs have given way to the concepts of 'rogue regimes' and 'terrorism', both frequently (though not always) underpinned by Islamophobia. Regime X, so the argument runs is, so atrocious that imperialist intervention/conquest is 'humanitarian' and liberatory, for the good of the people on the receiving end of it. This argument is given plausibility by the fact that many of the regimes in question are indeed atrocious (Saddam Hussein, Gaddafi, Assad in Syria, North Korea and so on).

Over the last couple of decades 'terrorism' has become an all purpose label designed to justify whatever the US government especially, but many other governments as well, might choose to do. A given country may clearly pose no threat whatsoever to the US, UK or France but they are 'terrorists' or 'sponsor' or 'harbour' terrorism, especially Muslim terrorism, and therefore it is legitimate to bomb or invade it. Thus neither Afghanistan, nor Iran, nor Iraq nor any Arab country has ever invaded or made war on America or any European country in the last several hundred years and are manifestly incapable of doing so. Ah! But they are 'terrorists' so 'we have to fight them over there, so that we don't have to fight them at home' as GIs are trained to say.

Socialists must reject both these justifications for imperialism. If a country has a horrific regime, often because that regime is armed and sustained by imperialism, this is for the people of that country to deal with, with the solidarity of working people from other countries. (Of course the capitalist press and politicians always downplay or rule out this possibility of change from below). It in no way negates that country's right to self-determination. Neither does the bogus issue of terrorism. 'Terrorism' as a political strategy can be critiqued from the left or the right. The left critique focuses on its inability to achieve its goals, and on its attempt to substi-

¹⁰This stages theory was lifted from the Russian Mensheviks, who argued that Russia was only ready for a democratic revolution, and counterposed to Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution according to which revolutionary socialists should put forward anti-imperialist and democratic demands but fight for working class leadership of the democratic revolution and its transformation into a socialist revolution.

tute the actions of a small 'heroic' group for the struggle of the masses.¹¹ The right wing critique is based on the notion that all political violence except that of the ruling class and its state is criminal, immoral and , they always say, cowardly, whereas the violence of the capitalist state and its armed forces, which is on a vastly greater scale - think of Hiroshima, of Vietnam, of Iraq etc - is not only legitimate and 'brave' but not even recognized as violence and is invariably described a 'fighting for our country' or 'peace keeping' or 'restoring order.' Moreover, the idea that the existence of terrorism excuses or justifies imperialist intervention inverts reality in that 95% or more of terrorism, including the infamous 9/11, is in fact a response to imperialism and oppression - a misguided response, but a response nonetheless.

Some complexities

Marxist support, on the basis of internationalism, for the right to self-determination and for national liberation movements against imperialism has shown itself to be a generally valid position since it first began to be established by Marx in relation to Ireland and Poland in the 19th century, through to its development by Lenin, Trotsky and other Marxists. This does not mean, however, that it is a simple absolute rule or that there are no tricky, complex or intermediate cases. Intermediate and complex cases always arise in life. In the first place it is sometimes debatable whether or not a certain group of people constitute a nation and therefore whether or not a call for national self-determination is appropriate or useful. There are clear cases - France is a nation, Pimlico is not¹² - but what about US Blacks, Jews internationally, Cornwall, Northern Irish Loyalists and so on.? In 1913 Stalin in *Marxism and the National*

Question advanced a 'definition' of a nation in terms of a combination of certain characteristics.

A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.¹³

This definition, due to its author, was to prove influential in the international communist movement but it is a wrong and mechanical approach. The problem is that nations like all other social and political phenomena are not fixed entities but develop historically and that therefore a 'people,' at precisely the moment their right to nationhood and self-determination is in question, are likely to possess some but not all of these characteristics. It is better to make the decisive criterion whether or not the people in question, in their majority, see themselves as a nation or aspire to nationhood (while understanding that this identification will be economically and socially conditioned). In debating the question of self-determination for US Blacks in 1939, Trotsky argued:

As a party we can remain absolutely neutral on this. We cannot say it will be reactionary. It is not reactionary. We cannot tell them to set up a state because that will weaken imperialism and so will be good for us, the white workers. That would be against internationalism itself. We can say, 'It is for you to decide. If you wish to take a part of the country, it is all right, but we do not wish to make the decision for you. Comrade Johnson used three verbs:

¹¹ For a classic statement of this left critique see Leon Trotsky, *Why Marxists Oppose Individual Terrorism*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1911/11/tia09.htm>.

¹² Pimlico is a district in London which was the subject of an Ealing comedy film called *Passport to Pimlico* (1949) in which the district declared independence (!).

¹³ J.V. Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question*, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1913/03a.htm#s1>

‘support’, ‘advocate’ and ‘inject’ the idea of self-determination. I do not propose for the party to advocate, I do not propose to inject, but only to proclaim our obligation to support the struggle for self-determination if the Negroes themselves want it. It is not a question of our Negro comrades. It is a question of 13 or 14 million Negroes.¹⁴

Another complexity arises in dealing with nations that do not fit neatly into the division between oppressor nations and oppressed nations. Lenin always insisted that it was necessary to distinguish between the nationalism of oppressor nations which is thoroughly reactionary and that of oppressed nations which has a democratic and progressive element in it. Much historical experience has confirmed this judgement. British, French and German nationalisms point rightwards to UKIP and the BNP, to Le Pen and the Front National, to Hitler and to Neo-Nazism. Irish, Indian and South African nationalism point leftwards to Pearse and Connolly, to Gandhi and the Communist Parties, to Nelson Mandela and Steve Biko. US Black nationalism leads to Malcolm X and to the Black Panthers.

But what of a nation like Scotland? Scotland is not and has not been an oppressed nation like Ireland (or India, Kenya, Algeria, Palestine etc). A comparison of the historical development of Scotland and Ireland makes this very clear. While Scottish industrialization marched forward in tandem with English industrialization Irish industry was held back. While Scottish living standards roughly kept pace with English, Ireland was dramatically impoverished. While the Scottish bourgeoisie became a partner of the English in British imperialism, the Irish bourgeoisie was marginalized and excluded. So what implications does this have for the so-

cialist attitude to Scottish nationalism and Scottish independence? Does it mean that support for national self determination ceases to apply?

No, because socialists have no interest in defending the unity of the British imperialist state and because if the majority of Scots want independence the denial of this right by the British state would be a violation of democracy and could, indeed, transform Scotland into an oppressed nation. It is true that Scotland has been a partner in British imperialism and thus an oppressor but Scottish nationalism and the demand for independence is directed **against** British nationalism and is a move towards a certain separation from British imperialism.¹⁵ At the same time it is necessary to emphasize that Scottish independence would not in itself solve any of the serious problems facing the Scottish working class and that unity and solidarity between Scottish and other UK workers, which already exists to an extent through the trade unions etc., should be maintained.

The case of Scotland is only one example but it clearly has implications for other nations such as Catalunya and Wales.

A further complexity arises when a nationalist movement, or what presents itself as a nationalist movement, in fact becomes a tool of imperialism (sometimes a rival imperialism). It has generally been accepted in the Marxist tradition that in such cases support should no longer be given to that national movement. Thus, in the First World War, Serbian nationalism (which had developed in opposition to the Ottoman Empire and to Austria-Hungary) became a tool of Russian imperialism and revolutionary socialists who took an internationalist position against the war (including the internationalists in Serbia) ceased to support it. When the Congo under Patrice Lumumba won its independence from Belgium in 1960 there was immediately a breakaway by the region of Katanga, but

¹⁴Leon Trotsky, *Self-determination for the American Negroes*, <http://www.marxists.org/history/eto1/newspape/isj/1970/no043/trotsky2.htm>

¹⁵This should not be exaggerated because an independent capitalist Scotland might very well sign up to European imperialism via the EU.

this was clearly being manipulated by imperialism, especially Belgian imperialism in order to undermine the Congo and retain control of the rich mineral resources in the area.

Matters are not always simple and sometimes lead to controversy on the left. For example in relation to the Korean War (1950-53), Tony Cliff, founder of the International Socialist tradition, argued that this was not a war of national liberation against US imperialism but a proxy war between the Soviet Union and the US, both of which had imperialist aims in the conflict: a view which was denounced by Stalinists and 'orthodox' Trotskyists alike¹⁶ but does seem to be born out by the historical facts. However, when it came to the Vietnam War, the IS view, along with the rest of the left, was that, despite Soviet backing, this was a genuine national liberation struggle meriting full support. In relation to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 there was a debate within the British SWP as to whether the Afghan mujahideen were a genuine movement of national resistance or simply an instrument of US impe-

rialism (which clearly supported them at the time). Subsequent history suggests the former position was correct.¹⁷

One thing these examples make clear is that it is not simply the provision of military support by an imperialist power that is decisive - the Soviet Union gave military support (for its own cynical and imperialist reasons) to various national movements, while opposing others - but whether the imperialist power has actually taken control of the national movement concerned.¹⁸ Clearly determining if this is the case in any specific instance requires not just abstract principles but also a concrete analysis of the concrete situation. But this is true of the national question as a whole and in making these concrete analyses- we present four in this issue of IMR - it must always be remembered that while there exists in Marxism and in socialism a presumption in favour of the right of nations to self determination this remains a means to the end of international working class unity and, in the final analysis, is subordinate to the interests of the international working class revolution.

¹⁶Though interestingly Cliff's view was shared by Natalia Sedova Trotsky in her Letter of Resignation from the Fourth International, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/socialistvoice/natalia38.html>.

¹⁷See Jonathan Neale, 'The Afghan Tragedy', *International Socialism* 12,(1981). <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/1981/isj2-012/neale.htm>

¹⁸Making just this point Trotsky in *In Defence of Marxism* gives a striking example. 'If Hitler tomorrow were forced to send arms to the insurrectionary Indians, must the revolutionary German workers oppose this concrete action by strikes or sabotage? On the contrary they must make sure that the insurrectionists receive the arms as soon as possible.... But this example is purely hypothetical. We used it in order to show that even a fascist government of finance-capital can under certain conditions be forced to support a national revolutionary movement (in order to attempt to strangle it the next day)' <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/idom/dm/09-pbopp.htm>