

Discussion on:

The question of nationality

I WAS very glad to see in this month's issue of *Marxism Today* an article on the highly topical question of national independence and the existing colonial frontiers in Africa.

Professor Potekhin in his article uses Stalin's definition of a nation—common territory, language, culture and *economic market*—as the basis for his study of the development of the peoples of Africa. He concludes that there are no African nations yet, although the most advanced peoples are in the process of forming themselves into nations, because they have not yet reached the stage of capitalism, i.e. there is no unique economic market. He examines in detail the factor in the struggle for African independence, which particularly interests B. R. Mann, namely, that the colonial powers have arrested the ethnic and economic development of the African peoples into nations.

B. R. Mann, on the other hand, either does not accept Stalin's definition of a nation—in which case she ought to say so—or else she has made an incorrect assessment of the historical stage of development of the peoples of Africa, since she freely assumes the existence of African nations and talks of national languages and national economies. (Admittedly the use of the words "national independence" in the African context is somewhat misleading.) In fact, of course, she has made the bad mistake of confusing historically-constituted communities with fully-developed capitalist nations. This is inadmissible.

She has observed correctly that the assumption that each colonial territory would develop within the existing boundaries into an African state instead of a European colonial state has in recent years been challenged, and, in my opinion, decisively so by the proposed union of Ghana and Guinea.

She foresees two possible developments in the political pattern of Africa; one, the breaking-down of large colonial territories into separate ethnic groups, e.g. the Ibo, Yoruba and Hausa peoples of Nigeria; two, the unification of ethnic groups arbitrarily divided by colonial frontiers, e.g. the Ewe people of Ghana and French Togoland or the Somalis in East Africa divided among five administrations.

Of course, these ethnic groups must, in the

future, enjoy the rights of a united community, but this does not mean that they will necessarily develop as nations. The Ewe people, for example, number in all 800,000 and it seems unlikely that they could ever be a strong, prosperous nation. Many such communities in the Soviet Union today have a common territory, language and culture, but they are part of a larger nation. The determining factor in Africa as elsewhere is the economic one: are these communities economically viable or should they join with other peoples to develop an internal economic market?

The struggle for complete independence of the colonial powers is concomitant with the struggle for nationhood. And it is quite ridiculous for B. R. Mann to pretend that Ghana independence has not yet opened up new possibilities in the solution of the national problem. Of course, independence within colonial frontiers is limited, but could the Gold Coast ever have contemplated union with Guinea, which is the starting point for the unity of West Africa? The main limitation on her independent status is due not to the fact that she has not changed her frontiers, but to the fact that her people have not yet realised the need to gain full economic independence from Britain.

Contrary to B. R. Mann's belief, the forms of political organisation are *not everywhere* dictated by the shape of the colonial boundaries. The political parties in French West and Equatorial Africa are organised on a federal and inter-federal basis and there is increasing co-operation in British East Africa which has lately shown itself in the formation of the Pan-African Freedom Movement of East and Central Africa. These political parties and movements are fighting, on different levels, for the closer cohesion of their neighbouring countries artificially divided by colonial frontiers, although so far they have not achieved the same measure of co-operation between French and English territories. As they achieve greater independence and ultimately full independence from the colonial regimes, they will constitute a strong force in Africa, and will eventually be able to regulate the ethnic frontiers within their federations.

I think that B. R. Mann is rather stuck with the "divide and rule" formula in her assessment of the Colonial Office's attitude to the Ashanti

movement of secession. In view of the strong nationalist movement in the Gold Coast, the Colonial Office was obviously forced to concede Ghana independence, but it infinitely preferred a strong Ghana, where the United Africa Company could carry on its profitable business in fair tranquillity, to a country at war with itself. The Colonial Office, which is not slow in discerning popular trends, would be quite happy to see colonial territories unite, *if* she thought she could still control them. A big "if", but her new approach can be seen in her attitude to the Ghana-Guinea union, whatever the truth of the rumours about Britain's action at the time may be. The main factor which perpetuates the *division* of the peoples of Africa is the inter-imperialist rivalries, which make each colonial power hold on to what it has got, regardless of the aspirations of the peoples of Africa.

These are my main criticisms of B. R. Mann's article. However I have some lesser ones.

I feel that the part of the article beginning "Afro-Asian Independence Struggle", which continues down to the last three paragraphs of the whole article is largely irrelevant to the theoretical discussion, although it would merit considera-

tion as a separate article on African history with a review of Sir Harry Johnston's biography. Having said this, I suppose I should refrain from further comment, since it seems a fair piece of descriptive reporting on the emergence of Africa into the world cultural and historical scene. However, I can't help but express my surprise at hearing that "the rapid progress of industrialisation, science and technology . . . was made possible largely by the capital accumulated in the slave trade"!

I think it is unfortunate to begin such a topical and theoretical article with an irrelevant quotation, which sets a tone of academic remoteness.

Two minor points of fact: it is optimistic to say that "there is today no African territory without a political emancipation movement so strong as to command attention". What about the Portuguese territories? Finally, the French Union ceased to exist on September 28th, 1958—it is now, of course, the Community; and what does this mean. "Even the small French colony (of Somaliland). in spite of threats (now carried out) voted against de Gaulle's constitution in the same strength as Algeria"?

Jenifer M. Warren.