


On the Question of So-Called “National Nihilism”: You Can’t Beat the Enemy While Raising His Flag

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Can revolution in the U.S. today come wrapped in the American flag? Can we “claim it as our own”? Should a revolutionary party be motivated by a desire to “save America. . . from her rulers and for her people”? Can a class-conscious revolutionary in the U.S. “have pride in the true history of this country”? These are questions which have posed themselves again and again in the development of the revolutionary movement in the U.S. and are doing so today. In fact, similar questions of national pride and patriotism have historically been very important in the advances—and setbacks—of the international communist movement.

Earl Browder, the naked revisionist former leader of the Communist Party, USA gave his infamous answer to these questions in the mid-1930s when he coined the phrase “Communism is 20th Century Americanism” and said that the CPUSA was carrying on the revolutionary tradition of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and the like. Unfortunately, when all was said and done, Earl Browder was right about the CPUSA (though most certainly wrong about genuine communism) because the CP had completely taken up the program and outlook of bourgeois democracy. Such a stand may be American and definitely is bourgeois, but for a communist it is a thoroughly counter-revolutionary one, especially here in the imperialist USA in this, the era of proletarian revolution.

It would be nice to pretend that revisionism started and stopped with Earl Browder. But this “easy target” method of struggle leaves too much dirt in the old CP unwashed and, even more importantly, leaves untouched many of the roots of revisionism and decay that have damaged all and destroyed some of the international communist movement over the past 50 years.



Today the call to revolutionaries in the imperialist countries to “pick up the national flag” is heard from such diverse and mutually cutthroat revisionist quarters as the Chinese revisionists who overthrew Mao’s line and from Enver Hoxha of Albania who is trying to appear most “revolutionary” in contrast. Even the Soviet-style revisionist parties inside the Western bloc countries are loyal to this “true patriots” creed—some even going so far as to say that, if they were in power they would favor remaining in the Western war bloc NATO for the “defense of the country”. In less crude forms, this nationalism has become accepted fare even in the proletarian revolutionary ranks. Spontaneously, too, this line comes up among progressive-minded people who are drawn to the view, for example, that opposing the draft should be advertised as the “real patriotism.” Some so-called “communists” say the same thing, and this amounts to a set-up to rally around the real flag wavers—the imperialist ruling class. Over the last 50 years bourgeois democracy, patriotism and communism have become so intermingled and mixed into one hulk, that it is necessary to begin summing up something deeply—and to do so quickly—in the face of the looming pitfalls and revolutionary opportunities posed by deepening crisis and war moves.

Dimitroff

Specifically it is necessary to look at the line of the Comintern (Communist International) which was systematically laid out by its General Secretary Georgi Dimitroff in its 7th World Congress in 1935. In his major address laying out the strategy of “United Front Against Fascism,” Dimitroff made the following statement: “We Communists are the irreconcilable opponents, on principle, of bourgeois nationalism of every variety. But we are not supporters of national nihilism, and should never act as such. The task of educating the workers and all toilers in the spirit of proletarian internationalism is one of the fundamental tasks of every Communist Party. But whoever thinks that this permits him, or even compels him, to sneer at the national sentiments of the broad toiling masses is far from genuine Bolshevism, and has understood nothing of the teaching of Lenin and Stalin on the national question.” (New Century Publications, 1945, p. 78)

By “national nihilism” Dimitroff meant to imply some sort of view based on the idea of wrecking, destroying or denying the whole history of development of the nation; of course, since this is a bit difficult, to say the least, for a basic materialist (such a history exists, no matter what you say), this straw man phrase “national nihilism” was meant to characterize and attack any view that did not base itself, ideologically and politically, on patriotic sentiments.

In a recent talk the Chairman of our Party’s Central Committee, Bob Avakian, spoke directly against this view: “Basically my point is that there is no such thing as so-called ‘national nihilism’; a communist does not talk about it. This concept was introduced in the most significant way during the whole Dimitroff United Front Against Fascism line; it’s a fairly significant line in his report and basically it was a way of greasing the skids for the slide into ‘defend the fatherland’ during World War 2.I don’t believe that this ‘national nihilism’ was a deviation that had to be combatted in the sense that it was raised at that time and I think that something should be said about it because I think this is an

important part of combatting national chauvinism. I think we have correctly used the words 'patriotism' and 'national chauvinism' interchangeably when talking about this country, and I think it's correct to continue to do that. This theory for combatting national nihilism to me is a theory for social chauvinism.

This came up around the Vietnam war, the idea that the reason we want to put a stop to the U.S. around the world is because we are ashamed about what a handful of phony patriots are doing in our name, the way they are misusing the American flag. No. They are properly using the American flag and they can have it. That is not why we oppose them being in Iran, for 'disgracing the American nation.'

I think this is going to be an important question. We might be able to unite with people who have these sentiments –in fact we should try to do so. But we should never blur over the two different lines here. In other words if somebody wants to get up and say, 'Let's stand with the Iranian revolution,' and they denounce these handful of imperialists (or whatever they might call them) dragging the American nation in the mud. Okay. But a friendly warning: we're not going to unite with that ideologically and we are going to struggle broadly against that kind of line. That's not why we oppose what the U.S. imperialists are doing in Iran. Let's not let chauvinism in through the back door. The reason we oppose U.S. imperialism is not because it's 'our own' bourgeoisie, in the sense of there being something especially American about it–or us. The reason we especially oppose the U.S. bourgeoisie is because this is where we are and the U.S. bourgeoisie is the one that politically rules over us and that oppresses many other nations in the world and tries to get their working class here to identify with that, and we have a role to play in opposing that. And that's why we pay special attention to this, not because they are American and we are American.

But this same attitude of "unity and struggle" cannot be taken when it is a question of people who claim to be communists and who fight for this to be the leading line of revolution. Here are those who are supposed to be in the vanguard of the class struggle urging the workers to cast their eyes backward–to making a fetish out of what is ultimately a bourgeois thing, the nation, instead of pushing things forward, through stages, to the ultimate goal of communism, which means the elimination of classes on a world scale and the merging of all nations.

Nationalism and Internationalism

The results of communists burying their independent line and their ideology beneath the mantle of nationalism are disastrous. This stands out especially starkly in the imperialist countries. Even in the nations oppressed by imperialism where nationalism can play a progressive role in the struggle, if it is adopted as the ideology of the party of the leading class, this, too, will mean that any advances in the struggle will be turned soon enough into their opposite.

Comrade Avakian also said, "I do not believe that in a fundamental sense there is for a communist such a thing as national pride. Mao Tsetung posed the question, 'Can a communist, who is an internationalist, at the same time be a patriot?' Mao correctly and

explicitly said that in the colonial countries that 'he not only can be but must be.' I think that is a question of practical political stand. That is correct. For example if a person in Iran was not patriotic in the sense of stressing the unity of the Iranian nation against U.S. imperialism it would be an error—a left error. We here would certainly be making an error if we obliterated that distinction between oppressor and oppressed nations—imperialist countries and their victims. But on the other hand, for all that, I do not believe that ideologically there is such a thing as national pride nor national nihilism.

There is the necessity in the colonial countries to fight against the ideological expressions of colonial domination; attitudes of inferiority can even take hold among the victims themselves. There is a sentiment within the colonized nations that they are not capable of standing on their own two feet, managing their own affairs and forging their own destinies. This is even necessary well after you have established socialism. It was certainly very important in China in the struggle over whether to capitulate to the imperialists or not, and I think it was quite correct for that to be stressed. When the revolutionaries said, for example, about the Antonioni film on China (a film that pictured China as bleak and backward) that 'any Chinese who has modicum of national pride would be disgusted by this film' I don't think they were wrong to make that point. They would have been wrong to make that the main point, but they weren't wrong to make it.

A socialist country is an entity, a state, and you can make use of patriotic sentiments of the middle classes as long as you don't make that the main thing and you don't make it the principle you are basing yourself on. Lenin wrote an article about this which I think is helpful. In Volume 28 in his article 'Report on the Attitude of the Proletariat to Petty-Bourgeois Democrats,' he made the point that because of the Bolsheviks' stand of proletarian internationalism and opposing national defencism they lost large sections of the petty bourgeoisie during the period of building up to and during the October Revolution. But during the civil war that followed, when the enemy imperialists came in on the side of the reactionaries and in form a part of the struggle was that these imperialists were actually occupying part of Russia, some of the patriotic sentiments of the petty bourgeoisie swung over to the side of the Bolsheviks because they wanted these foreign imperialists out. And Lenin was very blunt and said that these people had never been socialists and never would be, so we have to figure out how to unite with them on the basis of where they are at without compromising our principles. I think that's correct, but that's not the same thing as 'opposing national nihilism.'

In colonial countries it is correct for people to stress the struggle against the feelings of national inferiority and to build up a national pride of the people in the sense that they are not inferior as a nation. But that always has to be done –and here it gets to the basic point—not on the basis of nationalism but internationalism; not on the basis that the Chinese nation, or any nation, is superior to other nations, but that it is no less, not unequal, not inferior to them. So therefore what does national pride in a fundamental sense have to do with it? I don't believe it does. I think it's a question of internationalism and what concrete practical, political expression it takes under different conditions.

Class Betrayal Under a National Banner

But nationalism became the ideological line and political programme of the Communist International for the imperialist countries in the years before World War 2. Most of the parties took up this line with a revisionist, capitulationist gusto—and the results were disastrous. For example, the French party in the '30s proudly wore the mantle of nationalism with the slogan “Long live free, strong and happy France, faithful to its mission of progress, liberty and peace.” Here is a so-called communist party sounding for all the world like Voltaire or Rousseau—ideologues of the French bourgeois revolution a century and a half earlier. As Marx and Engels stated so clearly in the *Communist Manifesto*, Voltaire’s ideal kingdom of liberty turned out to be the very real kingdom of the bourgeoisie on earth. And, to put the French CP in its proper—and historically backward—place as compared to the bourgeois Voltaire, French capitalism was no longer progressive, rising capitalism, as in Voltaire’s time, but decadent imperialism—death-bound and seeking world domination, like all imperialism. This fact was not lost on France’s overseas colonies. But under the guidance of this line, it was lost on the so-called communist upholders of “happy France”: in his report to the 1939 Congress of the French CP, its leader mentioned French colonies only once—and then only to point out that their residents did not enjoy the rights of French citizens—as if that, not national liberation, was the goal of their struggle. In another example, in the pre-World War 2 Spanish Civil War—fought by the Spanish Republic (with the Communist Party) versus the fascist General Franco—Franco’s army included many soldiers from the Spanish colony of Morocco. But the progressive forces never came out for the independence of Morocco or any other Spanish colony—an act which could have even played a significant role in disintegrating Franco’s army and making victory over the fascists more possible.

These, together with Browder’s statements about communism being Americanism, and his later dissolving of the Communist Party USA itself, were just some of the more blatant effects of substituting nationalism for internationalism as the basic outlook of the communist parties. The effects of this line ran far deeper than just these crass manifestations.

Communist Manifesto

The basic attitude of communists toward nationalism during the 1930s grossly departed from the stand spelled out long ago in the *Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels: “The Communists are further reproached with desiring to abolish countries and nationality. The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got.” Clearly, if Dimitroff had been searching for the source of the so-called “error” of □ □national nihilism” he could have found it in the *Manifesto*. Of course socialist countries, when established, must be defended and, beyond that, communists have recognized that national sentiments and patriotism play a progressive, even revolutionary role in the countries of the world oppressed by imperialism—where the stage of the struggle is national liberation, as one step toward the proletarian dictatorship. But even there, as the *Manifesto* also said, “In the national struggles of the proletarians of different countries, they [the communists] point out and bring to the front the common interests

of the entire proletariat, independent of all nationality." It is the internationalist, not nationalist, outlook that must be brought to the fore, even when the stage of the struggle requires a program of national liberation.

Contrast the above statement from Marx and Engels with the following one from Dimitroff's report to the 7th Congress: "Proletarian internationalism not only does not contradict this struggle of the toilers of the individual countries for national, social and cultural freedom but, thanks to international proletarian solidarity and fighting unity, provides the *support* which is necessary for the victory in this struggle." (p. 81) This formulation reverses the correct—and Marxist—relation between national struggle and internationalism. Proletarian internationalism is reduced to *support* (Dimitroff's emphasis) for the national struggle (and remember Dimitroff was speaking of all countries here, including the imperialist ones). This reduces the proletariat to a supporter of the bourgeoisie.

Criticizing so-called "national nihilism" meant you had to criticize Marx, so the Comintern began to do so—behind only the tiniest of fig leaves. In a November 1938 article in *The Communist International*, for example, the following not-too-subtle attack on Marx appears: "For a long time the working class lived on the edge of the nation. It was more or less excluded from the national community of culture. In old German the word 'misery' was an expression for 'foreign'; and for the working class the fatherland was merely misery and foreignness. 'The proletarian has no country' was a profound and bitter conviction." (Note the past tense in the above paragraph, but lo!)

Through the class struggle the workers gradually won a place in the nation for themselves. By achieving democratic rights, by the shortening of working hours, by the right of combination and social legislation the beast of burden was transformed into a citizen. Through its parties, trade unions and other organizations the working class began to take an ever-increasing part in the life of the nation and the great national community of culture... The working class began to revise its relationship with the nation." ("The Working Class and the Nation," reprinted in "Clarity," published by the N.Y. State Communist Party Education Department, No. 1, p. 9)

Here it was, the perfect marriage between nationalism and reformism—both gutting the revolutionary and internationalist heart out of Marxism. Reforms now meant that the workers had a fatherland. Marx, of course, had seen more than a few reform struggles in his day, but somehow this didn't change his opinion that the workers had no country.

More recently than Marx, and after many more of these miraculous reform struggles the Comintern article spoke of had taken place, Lenin, truly unimpressed with these "miracles," wrote the following:

The national ideology created by that epoch [of struggles against feudalism to form nation-states] left a deep impression on the mass of the petty bourgeoisie and a section of the proletariat. This is now being utilized in a totally different and imperialist epoch by

the sophists of the bourgeoisie, and by the traitors to socialism who are following in their wake, so as to split the workers, and divert them from their class aims and from the revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie.

The words in the *Communist Manifesto* that 'the workingmen have no country' are today truer than ever before. Only the proletariat's international struggle against the bourgeoisie can preserve what it has won, and open to the oppressed masses the road to a better future." (Lenin, "The Conference of the R.S.D.L.P. Groups Abroad," Vol. 21, p. 160)

Attacking Leninism

Leninism stands for fierce opposition to national chauvinism and, in particular, to any attempt to camouflage imperialist reaction with talk about "the nation" and "defending the fatherland" in the imperialist countries. So the Comintern, taking off from this line of opposing so-called national nihilism, took an increasingly anti-Leninist position as well. For example, a different article in the same collection quoted above extends the Comintern's not-too-subtle polemics to oppose Leninism, too: "In connection with the first imperialist world war, masses of the workers came to abominate bourgeois nationalism and its despicable product, social patriotism. Many revolutionary workers identified the national idea with the reactionary chauvinism of the bourgeoisie, and to the social-patriotism of the Second International they opposed the complete negation of the nation. In this, however, they overlooked the fact that, although the nation is indeed ruled by the bourgeoisie, it is not identical with the bourgeoisie. The Communist International, in its manifesto on the occasion of the twenty-first anniversary of the great socialist revolution, characterized the nation as follows:

The nation is not the gang of fascists, reactionary financiers and industrial magnates who rob and betray the people. The nation is the many millions of workers, peasants and working people generally—the people that is devoted to its country, cherishes its liberty and defends its independence." (From "Changes in Bourgeois Nationalism," *The Communist International*, June 1939)

And their conclusion, of course, amounted to the same socialist masquerade for imperialist rule and domination that Lenin had bitterly polemicized against, "It has become the great task of the working class in *all* countries to save the nation." (From the first article, p. 9, emphasis added.) Lenin had already exposed this as the "socialist" cover for the imperialist debacle of sending worker to fight worker for "the nation." Here what is being said by the Comintern is not at all the Leninist position that it is the task of the working class in the colonized countries to lead the national liberation struggle against imperialism, while it is the task of the working class of the imperialist countries to support this struggle and generally oppose their own bourgeoisie and prepare to overthrow it guided by internationalism. Here, the communists of all countries were being led to become promoters and "saviors" of the nation, promoters of nationalism and thus, ultimately, tails on the bourgeois dog. In case anyone would think we are guilty

here of exaggeration, then read the following passage, also from The Communist International (again from "The Working Class and The Nation"), which takes Dimitroff's quote on "national nihilism" as its authority:

In the struggle against fascist imperialism and its reactionary accomplices the working class and its Communist Party are the only consistent defenders of national independence. The modern nations were born in the process of the bourgeois revolution. The reactionary bourgeoisie is betraying the national interests together with the whole heritage of the bourgeois revolution. It is the working class and its Communist Party which take over the legacies of the bourgeois revolution, maintain them against the traitors and develop them to a richer, fuller life." (p. 3) So, Earl Browder was not alone, nor original in his thesis that "Communism is 20th Century Americanism," and communists are told not to be revolutionaries whose final goal is radically different from all previous revolutions—the abolition of all class distinctions worldwide. Instead they are called on to be the further "developers" of the bourgeois revolution.

National Chauvinism in World War 2

This analysis by the Comintern on nationalism went hand in hand with their analysis of the world situation and the tasks of the working class in the period leading up to World War 2. While the world had changed greatly since World War 1, including the fact that there was now a socialist state, the USSR, which was a product of and potential base area for the struggles of the international proletariat, still, the basic era of imperialism had not changed in these twenty years. But in the Comintern, including in Dimitroff's report, there were strong tendencies to depart from the basic Leninist analysis of this era and the tasks of the proletariat in it. One area this showed itself in was the Comintern's line on the nation. There was a strong tendency to believe that with the advent of fascism in several countries, the whole role of the nation, of nationalism, and of the bourgeoisie in relation to it had changed. For example, in July of 1939 the Comintern said straight out, "Today there are states. . . whose imperialism is not simply a continuation of 1914.

Dimitroff, too, in his report to the 7th Congress, put forward the slogan "fascism is war." Fascism is certainly not peace, but this was taken to mean something markedly different and more "up to date" than Lenin's analysis that imperialism—capitalism in its highest and final, moribund stage—meant war. It meant that only certain imperialists—the fascists—were the source of war, not the imperialist system. Imperialist countries were classified into "aggressor" (i.e., fascist) and "non-aggressor" (bourgeois-democratic imperialist) states. In the first category, the fascist bourgeoisie was accused of being "destroyers of the nation" and upholders of "barbarism" (something different from capitalism). In the second "non-aggressor" camp, the bourgeoisie was (at least for a while in the 1930s) also accused of betraying the nation, but here the charge was that it was doing so by giving in, appeasing, surrendering to the fascist aggressors. In common between both these analyses was the idea that the proletariat should "oppose" the bourgeoisie in the imperialist countries on the basis of being the "true defenders of the nation." Increasingly, and especially after the Soviet Union was attacked, the mask of "opposing"

was thrown aside and the open line taken up of uniting with the bourgeoisie. . . increasingly under the bourgeois and chauvinist banner of defending the (imperialist) nation.

In Dimitroff's report, he lays the basis for this in concluding the section on national pride. He says that "opposing national nihilism," basing oneself on national sentiments, "...is *unquestionably an essential* preliminary condition for a successful struggle against chauvinism—this main instrument of ideological influence of the fascists upon the masses." (p. 82, Dimitroff's emphasis) In other words, the only basis to "oppose" chauvinism is with nationalism, not internationalism. Far from opposing chauvinism in the imperialist countries, this is a recipe, as Comrade Avakian has put it, for letting it in through the back door.

In a report to the 1978 Central Committee meeting of our Party, Bob Avakian hit just this sort of thinking: "The workers in this country can never make revolution by 'claiming the American flag as their own'—it is not—but only by learning to hate the American flag and all it stands for, and to take up the red flag...the proletariat cannot make its revolution as the leader of the 'nation' but against the actual leader of its nation—the bourgeoisie."

Twisted Logic

In the 1930s, reality was twisted wildly in an attempt to squeeze it to fit this analysis. For example, in June 1939, an article in *The Communist International* said, "The bourgeoisie—once nationalist-revolutionary, then cosmopolitan, then reactionary and chauvinistic—has now become the destroyer of nations, just as capitalism has changed from a constructive to a destructive force. The bourgeoisie, which once entered upon its domination at the head of, and with the help of, the nation, now trembles lest it lose its domination through a great national movement." And then, extending this twisted logic to the level of the ludicrous, the article goes on: "It is not by chance that the German fascists are coming more and more to use such imperialist terms as 'Reich,' 'greater German Reich,' and so on, instead of the word 'nation.' ... It is the will of the fascist dictators that the Germans shall not feel themselves to be a nation but 'followers of the Fuhrer.' It is well known that the fascist bourgeoisie also fears that the tide of a genuinely national movement may sweep over it." ("Changes in Bourgeois Nationalism") Now they were out to "out-nationalist" the Nazis. They flopped.

They went totally bananas to "prove" their point: "The destruction of the community of culture extends even to the language; the barbarous, confused and savage gangster slang of the German fascist is becoming more and more incomprehensible to those who learned to speak the German of Luther, Lessing and Goethe. A young Austrian Socialist who was imprisoned in the custody of German fascist turnkeys wrote to a friend: 'The worst was that I could not understand a word they said. What these brutes spoke was certainly not German.'" Not content with taking up the banner of the bourgeoisie, this line recommends that communists sound like aristocratic defenders of "the King's English."

Lenin's *Imperialism* Rejected

In all this, there was a great departure from, one could even say burying of, Lenin's great work *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, a work that must be taken up again as a foundation for thoroughly routing the influences of nationalism that still linger in the communist movement of today. In *Imperialism* Lenin saw and analyzed all the essential decadent and reactionary tendencies of the imperialist countries, and showed why they were due to the features common to all capitalism in its highest stage—and to nothing else. He analyzed why imperialism tends toward repression and violations of bourgeois democracy, and why it aggressively seeks world domination and redivision of the world through war. He even noted that, leading up to World War 1, Germany was the openly lusting, up-and-coming imperialist which had been largely cut out from the imperialist feast, so it was the more openly aggressive. But all this didn't lead him to talk about "aggressor" and "non-aggressor" states or to take sides. Even then, England was far more "democratic" and Germany more militarist and repressive, but Lenin's position (quoting Kautsky from when he was a Marxist) was: "In a war between Germany and England the issue is not democracy, but world domination, i.e., exploitation of the world. That is not an issue on which Social-Democrats [communists] can side with the exploiters of their nation"! (Vol. 23, p. 35) As Lenin explained in the prefaces to *Imperialism*, this book proved through analysis of "the fundamental economic question" that "the war of 1914-18 was imperialist (that is, an annexationist, predatory, war of plunder) on the part of both sides. (Vol. 22, pp. 188-89)

Lenin duly noted all the basic facts cited by the Comintern, but it didn't drive him over the edge into concocting special theories about communists continuing and developing the bourgeois-democratic revolution or being the true saviors of the capitalist nation. Lenin was clear, and it is necessary to be clear again today, that modern capitalist society is not a horror because it's something other than capitalism; America is not monstrous because it's practicing something other than "Americanism"; it's monstrous precisely because it is Americanism, it is imperialism. And this is capitalism in its highest stage, and, most importantly, capitalism in transition to something else. And that something else is neither barbarism, nor a new stage of bourgeois democracy, this time led by communists; it is socialism, proletarian revolution, itself a transition to communism.

Revolutionaries Should Look Forward

It is not the business of communists, nor anyone who wants liberation, to put their shoulder to the wheel of history and push backwards. This means that communists are internationalists, and not nationalists. Even in the countries oppressed by imperialism, where the stage of the struggle to be fought is national liberation, the goal of the struggle is not to try to repeat the process of the bourgeois-democratic revolution that went on in Europe, but to develop the struggle for national liberation as a step in the continuous process of a revolution whose goal is the proletarian dictatorship. In China, Mao stressed during the years of war for liberation that China's revolution was new-democratic, not bourgeois-democratic, that it could only be a transition to socialist revolution, and that the bourgeoisie could not lead any stage of this struggle. To accomplish this, and to

develop the struggles in these countries as part of the world proletarian revolution, requires uniting with patriotic sentiments, to be sure, but most of all it requires that the ideology of the leading class be internationalism and not nationalism.

In the imperialist countries the effect of this nationalism stands out all the more sharply and immediately. Here, the bourgeoisie is not capitulationist as it often is in the oppressed nations, but has the banner of the nation firmly clutched in its hand. In these countries, the proletarian revolution will be against patriotism and for something far more lofty and earth-shaking—our part in the international revolution.

In analyzing imperialism, Lenin, too, made the sharp distinction between oppressor and oppressed nations: “What do we mean when we say that national states have become fetters, etc.? We have in mind the advanced capitalist countries, above all Germany, France, England, whose participation in the present war has been the chief factor in making it an imperialist war. In these countries, which hitherto have been in the van of mankind, particularly in 1789-1871, the process of forming national states has been consummated. In these countries the national movement is a thing of an irrevocable past, and it would be an absurd reactionary Utopia to try to revive it.” (“A Caricature of Marxism and Imperialist Economism,” Vol. 23, p. 38) And as Lenin also pointed out, the aim of socialism is not only to bring nations closer together, but to merge them.

In all countries, and especially the imperialist ones, this means, when looking at the past, stressing the radical differences between the bourgeois revolutions, such as the American revolution in 1776, and the coming proletarian revolution. It means stressing that while such previous revolutions were necessary and progressive at that time, their time is past and now it is the turn of the proletariat. Washington, Jefferson and the rest cannot be spoken of as “our forefathers,” for the child their revolution begat was capitalism (deformed at that time by slavery) and it could only grow and develop into the ugly monster of imperialism, which we must overthrow. This materialist view is different, indeed, from Dimitroff’s call in the 7th Congress to “link up their [the working class’s] present struggle with its revolutionary traditions and past.” (p. 78)

National Pride or Internationalism

And what of other, related aspects of national pride, which Dimitroff raised in the 7th Congress as a necessary part of the outlook of communists. In the talk referred to above, Comrade Avakian addressed this question, as well:

Let us take the question: have the people of the U.S. made contributions to the world in the sense of science, culture and the arts? Yes. And so have the Chinese, the Iranians or any nation you can name, and that’s exactly the point. So with our outlook and our scientific understanding what is so special about the fact that it happens to be in America that this or that invention was made? What is there particularly about this or that cultural expression that we would want to uphold as ‘American.’ I don’t think that has anything to do with it. It just happens to be the masses of people in different countries, including the petty bourgeoisie and even other classes which were previously progressive, like the bourgeoisie, made contributions to the cause of humanity. What difference does it make

to us and why should we make a big deal out of it that they were from America or France or whatever? Now, if someone wants to make an argument—and the imperialists do—that the ‘the people of Africa are inferior’, then, yes, we have to say, ‘Look, it’s important that they were African people who did this’ as a refutation of that line. But we should not say the important thing is that it was people from this or that nation in Africa or Asia or the U.S. or Canada or what have you.

That’s internationalism, and if you practice it then you’re accused of national nihilism, of wanting to just wreck and destroy and deny any positive aspects to the history and contributions of different people of your nation. It was correct, for example in China, for them to preserve those historical relics that they found. What the revolutionaries used them for was to educate people about the old society and class struggle and the role of the masses. That’s why it’s good for us to save these things. There are some things that are generally of historical value, historical relics. It’s not that their value is monetary, but that it is historical, to educate the masses.

I do not, however, believe in the classless theory that this is a ‘classic piece of art and should be preserved.’ I do not happen to believe in that and I think this can be analyzed with historical materialism: if they had an important role in history then they are important to preserve because the masses should understand history.

Why should a communist of any particular nation make anything about the fact that this came from their nation. They should not, other than in the colonial countries to combat feelings of national inferiority, which is an ideological expression of imperialism. And even there the point should not be, ‘and therefore we’re such a great nation.’ That is the revisionist and nationalist line of Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping about ‘What a great nation the Chinese nation is.’

No, we’re not going to go around after taking state power in this country smashing everything ever produced by any other members of the other class or during any historic epoch previous to the one of proletarian revolution. But neither should we go around elevating these things to prove how great the American nation is. I think we should draw a class analysis of these things, analyzing them according to historical materialism and put that in the context of the whole development of mankind historically and educate the masses here in that. And we ought to put more attention on showing how people in Africa developed things than we should on the ‘great contributions of the American nation’ because we’re coming from an imperialist nation, not a colonized situation.

Class Capitulation in the Face of War

Especially as the threat of world war mounts, the temptation to make communism more “acceptable” by dressing it up in the national flag mounts. But in the imperialist countries, to do so ultimately means being acceptable to the imperialist bourgeoisie. It means assisting them in throwing dust in the eyes of the workers, who in such times more than ever need to have their eyes firmly fixed on the red flag, on their internationalist class interests, on the revolutionary way forward.

Leninism stands opposed to all such capitulation, no matter how refined or well-intended. In "The Junius Pamphlet", written in 1916 in reply to a pamphlet by the German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg (whose alias was Junius), Lenin takes on the line of opposing imperialism by being "true defenders" of the nation. While overall applauding Luxemburg's stand against the social-chauvinists (socialists in word, national chauvinists in fact), Lenin takes on her mistakes including especially her efforts to hold onto the national banner:

Junius, however, while brilliantly exposing the imperialist character of the present war as distinct from a national war, makes the very strange mistake of trying to drag a national programme into the present, non-national, war." (Vol. 22, p. 313)

Junius wanted to oppose Germany's part in the war on the basis of the true interests and "best traditions" of Germany. It was precisely an attempt to make internationalism more acceptable by trying to reconcile it with nationalism. Lenin raked this tailism as "a plan 'to outwit history'" and said that instead, the communists should have opposed the imperialist war of plunder with the war for socialism by the workers of all the fighting countries.

In imperialist countries the banner of the nation must be exposed, not idealized and upheld. "Defending the country" must be shown to be imperialist talk for defending their exploitation and expansion, instead of looking for a "better", "more just" way to defend it.

"Opposing national nihilism" became a recipe for straight up national chauvinism. A case in point was Dimitroff's line in this same report on the tasks of the German communists in response to the Versailles Treaty which imposed "loser's conditions" on Germany after the end of World War I. The Nazis blasted this treaty and used opposition to it to build up national chauvinism. Dimitroff argues that the German communists' approach should have been to beat the Nazis to the punch. He states "Our comrades in Germany for a long time failed to reckon with the wounded national sentiments and indignation of the masses at the Versailles Treaty; they were late in drawing up their program of social and national emancipation..." (p. 21) Instead of arguing for exposing this treaty as an imperialist peace which would itself again give rise to an imperialist war, and for concentrating on exposing your "own" bourgeoisie, Dimitroff argues that the German communists should take up the national fight of Germany to retrieve her "sacred lands", etc. Here, chauvinism has gone from the backdoor right up to the front door. Contrast this to Lenin's attitude toward another, different treaty (the Brest-Litovsk Peace) which the Bolsheviks concluded to get out of World War I—and gave up large amounts of land to do so. Lenin said, "At the time of the Brest-Litovsk Peace we had to go against patriotism. We said that if you are a socialist you must sacrifice all your patriotic feelings to the international revolution, which is inevitable, and although it is not here yet you must believe in it if you are an internationalist." ("Report on the Attitude of the Proletariat to Petty-Bourgeois Democrats," Vol. 28, p. 206) One attitude is an attitude that will train people in a revolutionary spirit, the other in imperialist gangster logic.

When all is said and done “national nihilism” is a straw man; the real danger has historically been shown to be falling into siding with one’s own bourgeoisie, especially when war approaches. In the imperialist countries, the banner of the nation can lead you there and nowhere else, no matter if, on the surface, this flag is raised in competition with the imperialists.

Summing up these departures from Marxism by the communist movement historically is an important part of preparing for the future. To successfully navigate the rocks and shoals that lie ahead, and to come out fighting for the class interests of the proletariat will require nothing less than Marxism-Leninism, Mao Tsetung Thought. To seize the opportunities that lie ahead means we need more of the attitude described here by Lenin:

The German workers would do it even more successfully if they began a revolution disregarding national sacrifices (that alone is internationalism), if they said (and backed their word by actions) that they prize the interests of the world workers’ revolution higher than the integrity, security and peace of any national state, and of their own in particular. (“The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky,” Vol. 28, p. 112).
