

# Against the revision of Lenin's conception of nation

I. Potekhin

IN his article "On African Nations", published in the March issue of *Marxism Today*, B. R. Mann most resolutely rejects my conclusions tending to show that by the beginning of colonisation the African people had not yet formed nations, and that it is only now that the process of the formation of nations is under way in Africa.<sup>1</sup> Let us examine his arguments.

*Argument 1.* Marx and Engels "freely wrote of nations of antiquity, and Engels e.g. examined the genesis of the German nation after the breakdown of the Roman empire".

In one of my works I have already indicated that "the works of Marx and Engels do not yet contain a precise definition of nations and narodnost".<sup>2</sup> It cannot be expected that the works of the founders of Marxism can give answers to all the questions of proletarian revolutionary theory. Marxist theory develops in unity with practice, on the foundation of general conclusions drawn from the practical experience of the labour movement. Neither the tasks of the international Communist movement of the time nor the problem of the theoretical struggle of that period demanded a precise scientific definition of the term "nation". The necessity of such a definition arose later, in the early twentieth century, when the centre of the revolutionary movement shifted to Russia with her multi-national population. This definition was formulated in the process of the sharp struggle of revolutionary Marxism against reformism. In those times great popularity was enjoyed by the theory

and programme worked out for the solution of the national question by the Austrian Social-Democrats R. Springer and O. Bauer. In Russia it was used by the Bund members and the Mensheviks as a weapon in the bitter fight with the revolutionary wing of the Russian Social-Democrats headed by V. I. Lenin. This theory and programme were ruinous for the labour movement, as they led to the inculcation of the ideas and principles of bourgeois nationalism in the midst of the labour movement, and to the splitting of the working class due to national motives.

It was then that V. I. Lenin entrusted to J. V. Stalin the task of writing a work setting forth the Marxist theory of the national question. J. V. Stalin carried out this mission by preparing and publishing his work *Marxism and the National Question*,<sup>3</sup> which became widely known. Here the definition of the term "nation" was formulated for the first time. This definition was based on V. I. Lenin's well-known thesis of the connection between the process of the formation of nations and the development of the capitalist method of production—a thesis which Lenin expressed as early as 1894 in his book *Who the "Friends of the People" Are and how they Fight the Social-Democrats*.

The force and vitality of Marxist theory lie precisely in the fact that it is never at a standstill, but that it moves and develops. It is the merit of the Russian Marxists that in the new historic period of imperialism they not only defended Marxism against the attacks of the reformists but developed it further and enriched it with new

<sup>1</sup> I. Potekhin. "The Formation of Nations in Africa". *Marxism Today*, October 1958.

<sup>2</sup> I. Potekhin. *The Formation of the National Community of the South African Bantu*. M., 1955, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> J. V. Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question*, *Collected Works*, Vol. 2.

theoretical discoveries. The precise definition given to the term of "nation" was one of these discoveries. Therefore nowadays anyone who wishes to be a Marxist, and who knows the history of Marxist theory, must look for a definition of "nation" in the works of Lenin and Stalin and not in those of Marx and Engels.

B. R. Mann knows the definition of a nation given by Stalin; he quotes it in his article and does not object to it. The reader has the impression that B. R. Mann agrees with the definition and that consequently what he opposes is not the definition but merely the conclusions drawn by Potekhin. In fact, however, he comes out against the definition of "nation" which is generally adopted in Marxist literature.

*Argument 2.* The emergence of nations is not connected with capitalism. "Presence or absence of capitalism has no bearing on the existence or non-existence of the nations of Africa. . . .

"Capitalism does not create the nations, it presupposes their existence. . . ." "Nations . . . existed from the dawn of history."

This is not a new viewpoint. It is widely known and is considered as generally accepted in bourgeois sociology. In our times this view is used by the opponents of the national sovereignty of peoples and states. In his book *The Idea of Nationalism*, the American sociologist Hans Kohn, who is one of the apostles of cosmopolitanism, maintains that the idea and form of nationalism were already developed by the ancient Greeks and Hebrews, and that in our days nation is a survival of the period of barbarity and savagery.<sup>4</sup>

But this viewpoint has nothing in common with the Marxist-Leninist views of nations and the national question. In his work *Karl Marx*, written in 1914, V. I. Lenin formulated one of the basic ideas of the Marxist teaching on nations and the national question with explicit clarity, permitting no misinterpretation:

"Nations are the inevitable product and the inevitable form of the bourgeois epoch in social development."<sup>5</sup>

J. V. Stalin developed Lenin's idea on this matter. Replying to a group of comrades, he wrote in 1929:

"Your erroneous assertions notwithstanding, there were no nations in the pre-capitalist period, nor could there be, because there were as yet no national markets and no economic or cultural national centres, and, consequently, there were none of the factors which put an end to the economic disunity

of a given people and draw its hitherto disunited parts together into one national whole."<sup>6</sup>

It seems clear that the viewpoint of B. R. Mann is in direct contradiction with that of V. I. Lenin. Yet the reader has the impression that he fully agrees with V. I. Lenin as, in order to refute my conclusions, he quotes V. I. Lenin, but at the same time misinterprets him. The reader is brought to believe that B. R. Mann refutes Potekhin, while in reality it is Lenin he refutes.

Maybe Lenin is wrong? So far I have no reason for entering into a discussion on this subject. If B. R. Mann considers V. I. Lenin to be wrong, we can argue on this question.

*Argument 3.* The African peoples have traversed a long path of development. "They have built up their civilisation, their towns and cities based on handicrafts and trade, erected their own states. . . . Not until quite recently were their economies ruined and their countries carved up among the colonial powers."

All this is true, and I have not the slightest intention of denying it. On the contrary, I have long ago had the opportunity of making similar statements to this effect. I can mention my booklet *L'Afrique est-elle un continent arriere?* which was published in 1955 by the French magazine *La Nouvelle Critique*. I quite agree with B. R. Mann in his evaluation of the historic past of the African peoples, but what has this to do with our discussion? There is hardly anyone who can doubt that in the nineteenth century the level of development of the Russian people was not below that of the African peoples, yet Russian Marxists unanimously recognise that the process of the formation of the Russian nation was only completed in the second half of the nineteenth century. More than that, we consider that some of the peoples of tsarist Russia had not even developed into nations before the victory of the October Socialist Revolution, that in some of them the process of the formation of nations is under way only now, in the period of socialism, and that they are becoming not bourgeois, but socialist nations.

I do not like to quote the works of the classical writers of Marxist literature without necessity. For instance, in my article "The Formation of Nations in Africa" I did not use a single quotation. But as B. R. Mann quotes Marx, Engels and Lenin and leaves the reader under the impression that he is in full agreement with them, I shall take the liberty of introducing one quotation from V. I. Lenin's works.

Referring to the medieval, i.e. pre-capitalist, period of Russian history, he wrote that "one could hardly speak of national ties in the true sense of the word

<sup>4</sup> Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism*. New York, 1945.

<sup>5</sup> V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Ed. 4, Vol. 21, p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> J. V. Stalin, *The National Question and Leninism*, Vol. 11, p. 351.

at that time: the state was divided into separate 'lands', sometimes even principalities, which preserved strong traces of former autonomy, peculiarities in the administration, at times their own troops (the local boyars went to war at the head of their own companies), their own customs frontiers, and so forth. Only the modern period of Russian history (beginning approximately with the seventeenth century) is characterised by an actual amalgamation of all such regions, lands and principalities into a single whole. This amalgamation . . . was brought about by the growth of exchange between regions, the gradual growth of commodity circulation and the concentration of the small local markets into a single all-Russian market. Since the leaders and masters of this process were the merchant capitalists, the creation of these national ties was nothing but the creation of bourgeois ties".<sup>7</sup>

V. I. Lenin gives here a sufficiently clear picture of the formation of the Russian nation in connection with the development of capitalism. This process began in the seventeenth century and was completed only in the second half of the nineteenth century.

To confirm his conclusions, B. R. Mann points to the Chinese nation. Yet according to the general opinion held by Russian Marxists, the Chinese nation completed the process of its formation as late as the end of the nineteenth century. This viewpoint was notably expressed in the article "On the Formation of the Chinese Nation" by G. V. Efimov.<sup>8</sup> The publication of this article gave rise to a discussion among Chinese scholars. Fan Wen-lan, for instance, maintained that the Chinese nation had been formed as early as the period between the fourth century B.C. and the third century A.D. Yet the majority of the participants in the discussion did not agree with Fan Wen-lan. "The Han nation could not be born amidst feudal society, and neither was it born in that period. The formation of the Han bourgeois nation began only after the emergence of capitalism", writes Chen Wen-ching (p. 38).<sup>9</sup> Most Chinese Marxists are of the opinion that the beginning of capitalism in China should be dated by the period of the so-called opium wars.

In connection with the problem of the historical limits in which a nation exists, the question arises, what terms should be used to designate the stage of the ethnical development of a people, or the form of its ethnic community, which precedes a nation. The Russian Marxists proposed the term "narodnost" which unfortunately has no equivalent in the West European languages. The letter which I received

after the publication of my article contained the proposal of translating the word "narodnost" as "pre-nation". This term has, however, the drawback of obliterating the difference between a tribe and a narodnost. If the participants in the discussion should offer some other term for "narodnost", their suggestions could be discussed.

B. R. Mann ascribes to me the introduction into science of the word "narodnost". I must point out that this honour is not mine. This term has been in existence in Russian literature for a long time already. In the early works of J. V. Stalin, the term "narodnost" is used as a synonym of "nationality" (not nation!). Its use introduced a certain terminological mix-up, as in the Russian language the term "nationality" is used to indicate the affinity of a person to a certain nation ("What is your nationality?", i.e., to what nation do you belong?). It is also used as a formal designation of all and any peoples, both those which have developed into nations and those which have not done so. "The House of Nationalities of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R." means the assembly of delegates representing the peoples of the U.S.S.R. and nothing else. In order to avoid this terminological ambiguity, J. V. Stalin unified the terminology when he was preparing the collection of his works for publication, and replaced everywhere the term "nationality" by the term "narodnost".

The essence of the question is whether Lenin's thesis of a nation as the inevitable product and the inevitable form of the bourgeois period of social development is recognised or rejected. In case of recognition, this must lead to the adoption of the division of the ethnic history of peoples into three stages: tribe, narodnost and nation.

Dealing with the question of the formation of nations in Africa, I proceed precisely from this thesis established by V. I. Lenin, as I declare with complete clarity in my book *The Formation of the National Community of the South African Bantu*. B. R. Mann does not recognise Lenin's thesis, and therefore declares that nations "existed from the dawn of history".

When applied to Africa, this assertion by B. R. Mann is in blatant contradiction with reality. The misfortune of the African peoples lies notably in the fact that the four centuries of slave trading and colonial domination have delayed their social and economic development, and their transition from a tribal organisation to a nation, and that the colonialists are now skilfully using the tribal division of the peoples to weaken the anti-imperialist movement. Side Shoyinka is undoubtedly right when he says: ". . . one of the causes of our backwardness had been our tribal

<sup>7</sup> V. I. Lenin, *What the "Friends of the People" Are and how they Fight the Social-Democrats*.

<sup>8</sup> *Voprosy Istorii*, 1953, No. 10.

<sup>9</sup> See collection of articles *Discussion on the Formation of Han Nations*, Peking, 1957. (In Chinese.)

groupings . . . let us start now to think about the idea of one people and one nation".<sup>10</sup>

I had a chance to attend the All-African People's Conference, where the problem of combating tribalism was one of the items on the agenda. This is what the Preparatory Committee of the Conference said about this question in its address:

"The time has come for an open exposure of, and an onslaught upon, the propagators of tribalism, who are today the most dangerous black agents of the imperialists for it is their poisonous policy of inciting Africans against Africans, brothers against brothers, tribes against tribes, which constitutes the greatest obstacle to the achievement of the *United Freedom Fighters' Fronts*."

The passionate call of the Conference to fight against tribalism in no way corroborates the standpoint expressed by B. R. Mann that nations in Africa were formed at the dawn of history, but it is in full harmony with my opinion that the process of the formation of nations is not yet completed, and that the survivals of the tribal organisation are still alive and rather strong. I do not give here any arguments to confirm my view concerning the level of the ethnical development of the African peoples, for I have already set them forth in my preceding article. B. R. Mann does not refute any of these arguments. Should he oppose their essence, this would give me a reason for coming out with new factual material for their substantiation.

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One of my correspondents puts me a question. He wants to know how we can speak about nationalism or nationalist movements in Africa if we deny the existence of nations there. This question is incorrectly formulated. I do not deny the existence of nations in contemporary Africa. I say that African peoples are living through the process of the formation of nations, that nations are still in the process of development there, and that this process has not yet been completed. The colonial regime is the principal obstacle in the way to the

<sup>10</sup> *West Africa*, January 24th, 1959, p. 88.

completion of this process. The fight for doing away with colonialism is waged for the elimination of obstacles standing in the way of the free development of nations, for the creation of national economy, for the flowering of national culture and achievements in the field of national vernacular languages. These objective requirements of national development find their expression in national ideology and in nationalism, which is the banner of anti-imperialist people's movements. Consequently, there is no contradiction whatsoever between my conception of the national development of African peoples and the presence of national ideology.

My correspondent makes a mistake when he supposes that national ideology appears *after* the process of the formation of nations has been completed. In fact, the formation of nations and that of national ideology occur *simultaneously* and run parallel to each other. The material prerequisites of a nation's existence—common territory, language, culture and economy—do not appear all of a sudden and do not fall out of the blue. They are formed gradually, in the course of many generations, and develop in dialectical unity. The presence of these prerequisites forms the material base for the emergence and development of national ideology. Like any other progressive ideology, it exercises a reciprocal influence upon the process of the formation of nations, accelerating the development of certain aspects of this process, notably language and culture. It inspires the masses of the people to fight for doing away with the barriers hampering free national development. This is the case with all kinds of ideas. The idea of Communism did not appear after the transformation of bourgeois society into a Communist one, but long before this transformation, and became a powerful means of transformation. The development of ideology cannot be reduced mechanically to the development of the material conditions of social life—it has its own interior laws. All these are elementary truths of Marxism. To remain on Marxist ground, one cannot counterpose the final stages in the process of formation of nations to the emergence and development of national ideology.