

Discussion contributions:

On the formation of nations in South Africa

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LIONEL FORMAN, in his article on the Development of Nations in South Africa which appeared in the April issue of *Marxism Today*, arrives at some novel—and, in my opinion, quite erroneous—conclusions, chief among them being his statement that there are no nations in South Africa.

According to him, none of the peoples of South Africa can be considered nations either (a) because they do not predominate numerically in a compact territorial area, and therefore do not have the right to self-determination; or (b) there is no single national market which they can call their own; or (c) they do not have a normal class structure.

Discussing whether or not the Afrikaner people constitute a nation, Forman says: "Common territory' *must* mean a territory on one's own, because basic to the national question is that of self-determination and the right of secession."

Stalin's well-known definition setting out the four essential characteristics of a nation is evidently insufficient for Forman. He adds a fifth, that of the right to self-determination and secession. In doing so, he merely succeeds in confusing the issues.

The question of a nation's *political rights* is one thing, the question as to whether a given people *constitute a nation* is quite another. The two categories, though inter-related, should never be confused. The right of self-determination, the right to secession, is basic to a *solution* of the national problem; it is certainly not basic to the *definition* of a nation.

Forman quotes Stalin on the Jews in Russia in support of his contention that the Afrikaners do not constitute a nation because they are dispersed among other peoples. The comparison is not a valid one, and is a good example of his failure to apply a correct historical approach.

In the first instance, the Jews were far more widely scattered—and the different groups more isolated—in Russia than are the Afrikaners in South Africa. The Jews were at no stage capable of acting together "whether in time of peace or

in time of war" (Stalin, *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*, p. 12). They were widely dispersed among a politically dominant, powerful people, far more advanced than they were (in the national sense).

Most important of all, the Jews were scattered over a huge territory, *not only extremely backward economically but sadly lacking in internal means of communication.*

The Afrikaners

The position is quite different with the Afrikaners. They have shown their ability to act together in war, as British imperialism found to its cost during the Anglo-Boer wars. Right now (to the detriment of other peoples, it is true) they are showing no mean ability to act together in time of peace.

They are by no means a numerically insignificant minority scattered among politically more dominant and advanced peoples. They are an extremely powerful minority, even in the numerical sense, and well organised politically, culturally and economically. They are more, not less developed, as a nation, than any other people in South Africa.

Most important of all, they live within the well-established boundaries of a comparatively *highly developed capitalist state*, well served with modern means of communication, making contact between the "dispersed" groups an easy and speedy matter. (The remarkable absence of dialect in modern Afrikaans is one indication of how close this contact has been.)

It is precisely these significant *differences* between the position of the Jews in Russia and that of the Afrikaners in South Africa which should have engaged the attention of Forman, and not the superficial similarity of dispersal, on which he places such great store.

But, comparisons apart, there still remains the question whether it is theoretically possible for a people to constitute a nation where they do not have a territory or a common economic life of "their own", but share a common territory and a common economic life with others.

Stalin throws some light on this in a passage

where he says: "*But the persons constituting a nation do not always live in one compact mass; they are frequently divided into groups, and are interspersed among foreign national organisms. It is capitalism which drives them into other regions and cities in search of a livelihood.*" (p. 28, op. cit. My italics.)

It seems, therefore, that there is at least a theoretical possibility that the existence of a *shared* economic life, and a *shared* common territory, are not insuperable barriers to the formation of different nations within the bounds of a multi-national state.

The same argument applies to the question of a national market, which is bound up with that of territory.

When dealing with abnormality in class structure, Forman not only again draws a false analogy between the Jews and the Afrikaners, but is also guilty of giving a completely distorted picture of the white worker.

It is simply *not true* to say that white workers are "essentially supervisors of African labour", nor is it true to say that they are entirely *petit-bourgeois* in outlook.

Had Forman attempted to prove his bald assertion, the falsity of his position would have been manifest. He could only have done so by completely ignoring large and essential categories: steel workers, building workers, railway workers, transport workers, clerical workers, post office workers, distributive workers—the list is endless.

Even a cursory glance at the voters' rolls of any of the urban constituencies would have shown him that the overwhelming majority of the white workers are by no means "essentially supervisors of African labour", but workers in their own right.

His assertion that the white workers are "entirely *petit-bourgeois* in outlook" is another misconception. The white worker may be pampered and petted, protected and privileged, completely under the political influence of "his" bourgeoisie, but he is by no means *petit-bourgeois* in his general outlook. And what applies to the white worker in general applies to the Afrikaner worker.

Class Structure

The Afrikaners have a normal, bourgeois class structure. Unlike the Jews in Russia, there is a "large and stable stratum" associated with the soil; there is a developed and fast-growing bourgeoisie, an equally fast-growing middle class, and a clearly defined working-class. The growth of capitalism in South Africa has made these class differences more and more distinct, not blurred

them, as anyone who has taken the trouble to study the history of the Afrikaner people would soon realise.

In the peculiar conditions prevailing here, distortion of class structure is inevitable and is to be expected among all South African peoples, but it is by no means as distorted among the Afrikaners as Forman would have us believe.

In any case, an abnormal class structure is not necessarily proof that a people is not a nation. Distortions can and do arise at given stages of a nation's history, depending on other factors. The Russian people remain a nation to this day, in spite of the fact that their present class-structure is certainly "abnormal" compared with that of a "normal", "bourgeois" nation—they haven't any bourgeoisie at all!

Now let us leave theory for a moment and look at Afrikaner people as such.

They are a people who, over a long period, have developed a distinctive language of their own; a distinctive culture which finds expression in many ways, including literature, and distinctive national characteristics. They live within the confines of a single territory and are closely bound together by a single economic life, even if shared with others.

In the same way as Americans, they do not regard themselves, nor can they be regarded, as "Europeans". They call themselves "whites" (in contrast to the English South African, who still calls himself a "European".) Indeed their very name, the one they have given themselves, means "African".

In their struggle to maintain their rights, this African people have fought two wars against British imperialism, successfully resisted all attempts (whether by Dutch or British) to destroy their language, and equally successfully resisted assimilation with other peoples.

For the past sixty years at least, their development has taken place under conditions of rising capitalism (i.e. *under the very conditions which give rise to the birth of nations.*)

Today, in a modern, independent bourgeois state, they supply the bulk of the armed forces (the standing army and the police force), staff the civil service and, through the medium of a powerful national political organisation, impose "their" will (which is the will of their land-owners and bourgeoisie) on the rest of the South African peoples.

As Forman, quoting Potekhin, says: a nation is not an imaginary or mystical concept—it is a very real phenomenon. The very real—if peculiar—phenomenon of the Afrikaner nation cannot be wished out of existence by describing them as

a national group, whose right to self-determination, to political secession, Forman, by implication, rejects.

Self-determination

It is when dealing with the right to self-determination that Forman paints a very peculiar picture indeed. It is precisely on this issue that his contention that there are no nations in South Africa leads him into the realms of speculation, where the harsh realities of the present day national struggles almost cease to exist.

"When freedom is won," says Forman, "the Afrikaners and other national groups, if they so desire, will, no doubt, obtain the opportunity to develop into nations, being given the essential territorial basis for such development, as has happened in the U.S.S.R. and China." (Forman does not elaborate on what he means by "freedom", though it is vital to a solution of the national question.)

No doubt. But being given the opportunity to develop into a nation is one thing, and the right to self-determination, the most important element of which is the right to secession, is another.

And who is to give them this "right", the right to develop into nations? The other people of South Africa? Yet the other peoples, according to Forman, are only pre-nations whose own right to self-determination depends entirely on "progressives" who "might, in certain circumstances" accord them that right.

Where there are no nations there is no right to self-determination, to political secession, except in the dim and distant future, when the "national groups" or the "pre-nations" have developed into nations. For the present, and until nations have developed, there is only the right to regional autonomy for the national groups and nothing definite at all for the pre-nations.

That is where Forman's arguments lead us, and they come uncomfortably close to a denial of the right to self-determination. They open the door to opportunism, for dominant nations, as in South Africa, are ever ready with the cry: "You are not yet ready. Wait a little while longer."

The recognition of the right to self-determination, to secession, *must be unconditional* even if, as Lenin said, "the chance of secession being possible and 'feasible' before the introduction of socialism is only one in a thousand." (Quoted by Stalin, p. 198, op. cit.)

(The recognition of the right to secession does not, of course, mean the same thing as support for any particular demand for secession.)

Forman, as I said earlier, deserts reality for speculation when dealing with the right to self-

determination. He discusses it in the abstract, as if we already had a single socialist, soviet state in South Africa. He forgets that the struggle has not yet been won, and that the course of the struggle might take a very different path to that he has mapped out.

Reality makes nonsense of his assertion that "although in Europe the demand for self-determination in some form was a characteristic feature of the national struggle, this is not the case in South Africa".

The question of the right to self-determination, in one form or another, is ever present in South African politics, and therefore cannot be ignored.

The Afrikaner has raised it time and time again *vis-à-vis* British imperialism, and even today the demand for a republic figures prominently in the Nationalist Party programme. It arises in relation to the Protectorates and South-West Africa.

More important still, the Afrikaner bourgeoisie is raising the issue (although distorted) in an increasingly sharp form internally, *vis-à-vis* the African peoples in particular.

The arch-apostles and theorists of apartheid have been moving steadily from the concept of "horizontal" apartheid to that of "vertical" apartheid, i.e. the creation of separate territorial areas. This concept finds concrete expression in the controversial "Promotion of Bantu Self-Government" Bill now before the Union parliament, whereby the Nationalists seek to create a fantastic edifice of "autonomous" tribal regions (with, however, no real rights) for the African peoples.

Some Afrikaner bourgeoisie theorists have gone even further (and by so doing have inadvertently exposed the reactionary, oppressive and fraudulent nature of the Nationalist Government's policy). For example, a certain Professor Coetzeen recently proposed the creation of *separate and entirely independent states*, even if this meant, as he put it, "a considerable displacement of the white population".

So we see that the Afrikaner bourgeoisie, in their desperation, are themselves pushing the question of self-determination very much on to the agenda, as it were, and thereby make it a matter for practical (as opposed to speculative) politics.

The oppressed non-white peoples, on the other hand, strenuously oppose the policy of apartheid, of separation, whether horizontal or vertical. Their counter-demand is for a single, multi-national state, in which full democracy for all will guarantee the rights of the different nationalities.

The most significant factor in the national liberatory struggle in South Africa, the factor

which distinguishes it from previous similar movements in Europe and, indeed, from similar movements in the rest of Africa today, is the fact that here it is the working class and revolutionary intelligentsia among the oppressed peoples which is taking the lead in the struggle.

The revolutionary working-class tends naturally towards unity, internationalism; the bourgeoisie tends, just as naturally, towards disunity, national exclusiveness.

The demand for a single, fully democratic, multi-national state is therefore not merely a negative "absence of a demand for self-determination". It is, above all, a positive demand which has a specific *working-class revolutionary content*.

One further point remains on the issue of self-determination, for it will be asked: how is the Afrikaner, at present dispersed among other nationalities, to exercise the right to secession in the absence of a separate territory? What part of South Africa would we give him? Are we not being impracticable when we say his right to self-determination must be recognised when no opportunity exists for him to secede?

No, we are not being impracticable. If the Afrikaner, either on his own or together with others, were to demand the right to secession, the opportunity for him to do so would have to be provided in the shape of a separate territory. To force him to remain within the same state as others against his will would not only violate his right to secede but leave the national problem unsolved.

How it would be done, and what separate territory would be provided is not a question which we need answer now. For, as Lenin said, dealing with this very question of "practicability", "it is a matter that will be determined by a thousand factors, which cannot be foreseen." It might never even arise, for the course of history is not yet run.

The important thing is not when, where or how, or whether the Afrikaner will ever demand secession, or even whether it is desirable. The fear the Afrikaners have of being "swamped" in a multi-national, fully democratic state, is one on which the Afrikaner bourgeoisie is constantly playing. To recognise the right of the Afrikaner to self-determination now will go a long way towards dispelling those fears. It would assist in weaning the workers and other sections away from "their" bourgeoisie, and make it easier to persuade them to move in the opposite direction—towards a truly democratic, multi-national South African state.

What form such a state would take, whether it would be a federation of states or a collection of

autonomous regions, or something else again, is really a matter for speculation, and I am quite willing to leave that aspect to Mr. Forman.

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Space does not permit me to deal with the question as to whether any of the African peoples can be considered nations. That would require far more detailed treatment than is possible here.

Suffice it to say that the question is far more complicated than Forman realises. Among other things, one would have to examine very carefully the effect which the impact of capitalism has made on the different peoples. It cannot be answered by juggling with formulae.

Potekhin says, for instance, that several of the African peoples in South Africa (e.g., the Zulus and Xhosas) had already reached the "narodnost" stage at the beginning of the present century. Almost sixty years of intensive political, social and economic development have taken place since then, and it might very well be that some of these African peoples have already reached the stage where they may be considered as nations.

Lionel Forman

IT was not as a mental exercise that the Bolsheviks went to such great pains, in 1913, to state clearly what it was that they meant by the term "nation". They did so because there was an urgent practical need to define clearly the type of community for which Communists would advance the slogan of self-determination.

This required an analysis of the *specific* characteristics which make a community so tightly knit and economically integrated that it is capable of leading a separate political existence.

Stalin's definition, involving common territory, language, culture and economy, as expounded by Potekhin in the article which began this controversy,¹ has been tested in practice through the years, and found to serve its purpose so well that it has been accepted universally by Communists as the starting-point of all discussions on the question.

Stalin declares, "*there is no nation which at one and the same time speaks several languages*".²

I would be the last to suggest that Stalin's words must be treated as gospel, but I certainly do suggest that Comrade J. T. Adams should lay some sort of theoretical foundation before he in effect declares blithely that this definition is

¹ *Marxism Today*, October, 1958.

² *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*, Lawrence and Wishart, 2nd Edition, p. 6.