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Behind the Slogans: “National Independence”

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Hope has been said to be a good breakfast but a poor supper. So is the struggle for national independence. Since most oppressor nations force on subject nations the loss of political and social freedom as well as national freedom, which means little by itself, the original struggle for national freedom becomes linked with the struggle for political and social freedom, and is therefore progressive and even revolutionary. Scotland, when she lost her national freedom, did not become politically unfree as separate from England, and so Scottish nationalism has never become a reality, though the demand for social freedom persists there as in every capitalist country. India, when she became part of a foreign empire, lost any chances of political freedom, and the demand for political and social freedom is linked up in a progressive movement.

Above all we see this illustrated in the struggles of the European countries against imperialism in the nineteenth century. Hungary, Finland, Italy, Bulgaria, Greece, Czechoslovakia, Macedonia, Armenia, Albania, Poland... The sympathy for these subjugated nationals was intense in the Western world,

and in spite of many bloody struggles and suppressions liberal republicanism did its best to achieve national independence from the ruling powers of Europe, — Russian, Austrian and Turkish.

Each of these Empires was destroyed — the Czarist, the Habsburg, and the Ottoman. Excepting Macedonia and Armenia, each of the oppressed nations of Europe became free in a national sense following the great split-up that followed the first world-war. National independence, the goal of the nineteenth century, became a snare and a delusion. Poland, that had suffered under three despotisms (Austrian, Prussian and Russian) simultaneously, suffered the ignominy of seeing a fourth despotism arise, that of the native Polish landlords. All the blood that had flowed to make Hungary free flowed again beneath its rising fascist dictatorship. The last of the independent nations to retain forms of liberal democracy were Finland and Czechoslovakia; the latter to lose it in the Munich share-out, and the former to suffer beneath the two-pronged drive of Germany and Russia in this war.

National independence cannot be said to have been a boon to the suppressed nations of Europe, now once again suppressed beneath newest imperialism. Since it retains to-day the Western sympathy it enjoyed in the last century, let us see how genuine much of that sympathy is.

The sympathies of the British Government inclined of course to the balance of power. It supported Italian freedom when the Austrian oppressor was a rival. Under Disraeli and the Tories it supported Turkish Imperialism, though Gladstone denounced its massacres and its possible rivalry to the British Empire. It attacked Austrian Imperialism always, and when Russia became a rival and a menace to the Indian Empire, Russian Imperialism too. That British ruling-class “sympathy for national independence” was hypocritical was shown in the answer by foreign diplomats: “What about your Irish?” At that time, the Irish question was at least as burning as, say, the Finnish. Another

ironical — and true — answer came from Nasir Pasha, general of the Sultan, who replied to hostile English critics that he was going to do what the British had just done in the Transvaal (Boer War), before he massacred the Albanians, Bulgarians and Macedonians, after the Monastir rising.

Whenever British policy inclined to a nation, that nation was helped; when it inclined to its ruler, that nation was forgotten. Such was the “balance of power” .Ruling class sentiment always inclines to its own interests. To-day, Germany attacks British Imperialism for its colonial policy — not because her colonial policy is any different; British Imperialism attacks German occupation, not because she was not its tutor; they are neither of them concerned with national independence *as such* but only as a means of attacking their rivals.

The Allies did not pick on Poland’s cause because they supported Poland. but because (admittedly) at some time they had to stop Hitler Imperialism before it directly attacked British Imperialism. Wars are not caused through the defence of national independence, or through any “St .George and the Dragon” motive, but through economic causes and for purposes of aggrandisement or retention of aggrandisement. Let us therefore, make an end to all the nonsense current that the major Powers are moved by feelings of sympathy towards the minor Powers.

Also, let us finish with the nonsense that certain nations are responsible for wars, insofar as they cause wars between the major nations e.g., Alsace-Lorraine, the Balkan countries, etc. The peoples of those countries can, when unaggravated by senseless national distinctions and deliberate attempts to foster separatism between peoples, live together peacefully. Interests not their own cause trouble between them. Hostile prejudices and inculcated teachings foster dissension, but taking away power politics one takes away those prejudices and teachings. In the future there must be no more of this petty disruption that has so long served a privileged few, but a united Europe and a united world.

Certainly we must take up the struggle for national independence when it becomes a struggle against an imperialism. But that struggle for national independence must be waged by the workers and peasants, and we must dissociate ourselves with any bourgeois leaders — for instance, the exiled governments in London, the bourgeois leaders of the Indian Congress etc. — and associate ourselves instead with the masses who alone carry out that struggle. And independence must not be a goal, but a lever to oust imperialism; and when that imperialism is ousted we aim not for an independent bourgeois government, but a revolutionary movement that is going to struggle with other revolutionary movements in other countries for a FREE WORLD.