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Towards a Marxist approach to the Cyprus problem today (Online Article)

Historical Note

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Content

Towards a Marxist approach to the Cyprus problem today

Phedias Christodoulides

Despite the production of several generally left-wing analyses and positions on the so-called Cyprus problem in recent years, a Marxist approach to the problem is absent. The Greek Cypriot left approaches the Cyprus problem almost entirely from either a liberal or a nationalist point of view, being at the tail end of the intra-bourgeois dispute on the issue between liberals and nationalists. The vast majority of the left is on the liberal side of the dispute, supporting a bizonal bicomunal federation (BBF) as the best possible solution to the problem. BBF is presented as a necessary condition for national peace on the island, and sometimes also as a necessary condition for future class struggle. (The latter is the attitude of some far-left groups such as [Anitifa Lefkoşa](#), [Syspirosis Atakton](#) and the [Stasis](#) group.) On the nationalist side of the dispute, we find the Greek Cypriot supporters of KKE (Communist Party of Greece), along with a few former anarchists. KKE rejects BBF, considering it a solution that originates from and serves the NATO imperialism of the US, UK and Turkey. Instead of BBF, it supports a unitary Cypriot state.

Neither side of the controversy is Marxist, despite some claims to the contrary. KKE supporters in particular claim to be orthodox Marxists who base their analysis of the Cyprus problem on Marxism, but are simply Stalinists who misrepresent Marxism to justify their unconscious Greek nationalism. Their minimization of the responsibility of Greece and the Greek Cypriot community for the problem is indicative. Since their nationalism clearly contradicts Marxist proletarian internationalism, I will not examine their approach to the Cyprus problem in this paper: their approach is clearly non-Marxist. On the liberal side of the controversy, only one organisation, Stasis, has attempted to base its support for BBF directly on Marxism. Below, I refute Stasis's analysis, and also examine some of the more important recent left and far-left analyses.

My aim here is to identify the Marxist framework for examining national issues and to make a start in applying this framework to the so-called Cyprus problem. I first examine the Marxist approach to the national question as it was historically shaped from the young Marx and Engels to the Second

International and Lenin. It is necessary to look at the Marxist approach evolutionarily and historically as there is no single Marxist position that applies to all national issues everywhere and always. Instead, there is a basic principle that determines the Marxist position on each individual national question at each individual historical juncture. This principle is the Marxist commitment to the goal of the world proletarian revolution. Essentially, on each national question, Marxists adopt the position that contributes most to the revolutionary goal. The Marxist approach to the national question is therefore primarily a strategic approach; the individual positions adopted all derive from the primary revolutionary objective.

I then apply my conclusions from the above analysis to the Cyprus problem. I will not examine the Cyprus problem in depth, nor will I examine how it has been shaped historically as a problem. I will limit myself to a few general points about the nature of the problem today, its relation to the Left and the tasks it calls us to undertake. These points are intended to guide any future Marxist approach to the problem. I ought to note here that my text owes much to the excellent Spartacus League text "The National Question in the Marxist Movement, 1848-1914".

1. Marx and Engels on the National Question

Marx and Engels' earliest position on the national question was expressed in the context of the revolutions of 1848 in relation to the goal of achieving European bourgeois-democratic revolutions. At this period, Marx-Engels argued that the advanced European states needed to undergo a bourgeois-democratic revolution as a precondition for the future socialist revolution. They wanted bourgeois democrats to take over power from the reactionary aristocracy of Central and Eastern Europe and establish bourgeois democracies.

Their conception of the necessity of bourgeois-democratic revolutions for the socialist demand was the general principle that guided Marx and Engels' individual positions on national questions in Central and Eastern Europe. Marx and Engels espoused no abstract universal principle of national self-determination for peoples; their positions on this question were strategic in nature. What interested them was to create the conditions for world socialist revolution, and they considered that the basic such condition achievable in the revolutions of 1848 was a bourgeois-democratic Europe. Their positions on the various national issues of Central and Eastern Europe derived from the goal of a bourgeois-democratic Europe. They believed that some European nations were more progressive than others, and that only progressive nations, that is, those that had the potential to create bourgeois-democratic states, deserved support in their struggle for self-determination.

These nations were the Germans, the Poles and the Hungarians, the only nations with significant urban populations in Central and Eastern Europe. The other Slavic peoples were almost entirely agrarian nations, considered too underdeveloped to formulate bourgeois-democratic demands. Marx and Engels thus advocated the creation of three bourgeois democratic states, a Greater Germany, a Greater Poland and a Greater Hungary, where the remaining Slavs were expected to assimilate culturally. Consequently, Marx and Engels did not support the national struggles of the Slavs in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and disagreed with Bakunin's abstract support for self-determination for all peoples without exception. Tsarist Russia was also considered too underdeveloped and reactionary for a bourgeois-democratic revolution, with Marx and Engels advocating an independent Poland precisely as a bulwark against Russia.[1]

I do not wish to judge the correctness of Marx's and Engels' empirical conclusions about the progressiveness or backwardness of the various European nations/nationalities in 1848. Suffice it to say that the thesis that there are more progressive and more backward nationalities was later

abandoned by Marxism, and rightly so: it makes no sense today to talk about progressive and reactionary nationalities/nations.

After the failure of the revolutions of 1848, Marx and Engels placed great emphasis on the need for European economic development, again as a fundamental precondition for the European and world socialist revolution. They considered that the failure of the revolutions was due to the economic backwardness of continental Europe, a backwardness that regulated the development of the proletariat as a class. Greater economic development, i.e. the progress and maturation of capitalism, implied for them a larger, stronger and more mature proletariat. Thus, they supported such development. Since they also believed that the unification of Germany and Italy would significantly accelerate economic growth, they also supported these unifications. They believed that a united Germany would give a huge boost to the economic growth of Europe and would produce the most advanced labour movement in Europe. In retrospect, they were right, as the growth of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) proved. They also continued to support the assimilation of all 'backward' nationalities into the 'progressive' nations of England, France, Germany, Poland and Hungary.

Marx began to move away from his view of assimilation in the late 1860s, in the context of the Irish question. While he first supported the assimilation of the Irish into Britain, in the late 1860s he changed his mind and began to support Irish independence. The reason for this change was that Marx concluded that the existence of an Irish proletariat in Britain was responsible for the otherwise inexplicable political backwardness of the economically and organisationally advanced British proletariat. Britain was the most economically and politically advanced country in Europe, but its proletariat lagged behind the continental proletariat. Marx came to believe that this was due to the division of the British proletariat into English and Irish. This coexistence was antagonistic and reinforced English and Irish nationalism, leading the English and Irish proletarians to identify with their bourgeois classes rather than to develop their class consciousness. As Marx wrote in 1870 in a letter to S. Meyer and A. Vogt: “This **antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class**, despite its organisation. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power.”[2] (Translator's note: I have replaced the author's Greek translations with the official English translations from the sources cited) [3]. Marx advocated Irish independence as a way of separating the English from the Irish proletariat, eliminating their antagonism. He came to regard the physical separation of the two proletariats as a precondition for their political unity.

Marx and Engels abandoned their assimilationist position in the last decades of their lives. In the late 1870s they began to believe in the possibility of a radical democratic revolution in Russia and even considered that this revolution could serve as a stepping stone for proletarian revolution in the West.[4] This possibility significantly reduced the importance of Polish independence in their eyes. Engels still supported Polish independence, but not as a bulwark to Czarist reaction. Instead, he argued that national independence was necessary for the development of class struggle in any “progressive” nation like Poland. As he wrote: “It is historically impossible for a great people even to discuss internal problems of any kind seriously, as long as it lacks national independence...So long as Poland is partitioned and subjugated, therefore, neither a strong socialist party can develop in the country itself, nor can there arise real international intercourse between the proletarian parties in Germany, etc, with other than émigré Poles...An international movement of the proletariat is possible only among independent nations.” As always, the criterion for the legitimacy of national independence is whether independence facilitates the socialist revolution. At the same time, the Franco-Prussian War saw the unification of Germany but without Austria, leaving open the question of what to do with the multi-national Austro-Hungarian Empire. Engels became more open to Slavic self-determination at the end of his life, with the condition that it would only happen after the fall of

Tsarism, so as not to be exploited by a reactionary Tsarist Russia.[5]

As is clear from the above, Marx and Engels always approached the national question strategically and not as a matter of principle. They changed their views on specific national questions during their lifetimes, always with the overriding interest of the socialist revolution in mind. It should also be noted that Marx and Engels were strong internationalists who supported German unification only as a means to global socialist revolution. They proved their internationalism beyond doubt by supporting the French against Bismarck's invasion of France during the Franco-Prussian War.

*** The National Question at the Second International**

During the period of the Second International (1889-1916) there were four main competing positions on the national question. These were: 1) the position of Karl Kautsky, the theoretical leader of German Social Democracy, 2) the position of Karl Renner and Otto Bauer, the Austro-Marxist theoretical leaders of Austro-Hungarian Social Democracy, 3) the position of Rosa Luxemburg, and 4) the position of Vladimir Lenin. There are similarities and differences between the four positions, and their relationship is quite complex. I briefly summarize the first three before focusing on Lenin's position, since it is this that has gone down in history as the 'orthodox' Marxist position and has been the victim of relentless abuse to this day.[6]

Kautsky supported the right of nations to self-determination. He directed the International to reject the outmoded view of Marx and Engels that Russia was more backward than Germany and Austria-Hungary, and this led the International to adopt the principle of the right of nations to self-determination. Kautsky supported the right of nations to self-determination because he perceived multi-ethnic states such as Austria-Hungary, Russia and the Ottoman Empire as reactionary, feudal remnants. He wanted the break-up of these states into their constituent nations as part of a necessary bourgeois-democratic revolution in Eastern Europe.

Kautsky never publicly supported the dissolution of the multinational states, because the Austrian Social Democrats disagreed with him on the issue. The national program of the Austrian Social Democrats, formulated at the 1898 Brunn Congress, called for a federal, democratic Austro-Hungarian state, not for national self-determination. Even the most radical of the Austrians did not express support for national self-determination. The main reason for this lack of support was the reasonable and widespread belief that the break-up of Austria-Hungary would lead to war between Germany and Russia over the former's territory. The Austrian social democrats thus sought to formulate a program that would mitigate the violent ethnic antagonisms in Austria-Hungary while preserving Austria-Hungary as an entity. The basis of this programme was the principle of so-called "cultural-national autonomy". According to cultural-national autonomy, nations should not be understood in territorial terms, but rather culturally, like religions. A nation is a non-territorial association of individuals. Different nationalities should have their own cultural institutions, e.g. their own separate schools, but living together in the same state or territory. Nationalities should be culturally -but not territorially- autonomous. Unlike Marx and Engels, the Austro-Marxists viewed nationality positively, i.e., they were nationalists. They wanted a communism where different nationalities organized autonomously; nationality was not something that had to be overcome.[7]

At the other end of the spectrum from the nationalist Austro-Marxists was Rosa Luxemburg. Luxemburg always countered nationalism by using internationalist propaganda. Her work on the national question focused on the issue of Polish independence (she was Polish). She opposed Polish independence on the grounds that Poland was too economically integrated with Russia for independence to be viable, and also because she saw Polish nationalism as a petty bourgeois

reactionary phenomenon. More importantly, Luxemburg was optimistic that a socialist revolution could begin in Russia and then spread westward. In this she followed Trotsky, accepting his theory of permanent revolution as expressed, for example, in 'Results and Prospects'. Poland was the most economically advanced part of the Russian Empire and Luxemburg believed that it would play an important role in a Russian revolution. As Spartacists correctly note, Luxemburg saw Russia in the same way that Marx saw Germany in 1848: as the springboard for the coming socialist revolution. Again, like Marx, her position on the national question was strategic, deriving from the primary goal of the global socialist revolution.

* **Lenin on the National Question**

At first glance, Lenin's position on the national question appears to be the same as Kautsky's. Lenin, like Kautsky, categorically supported the right of nations to self-determination: "The article of our programme (on the self-determination of nations) cannot be interpreted to mean anything but political self-determination, i.e., the right to secede and form a separate state." [8] He noted that the right of nations to self-determination was an essential point in the Bolshevik programme because of the fact that the Russian empire included many different nations/nationalities that were all oppressed by the tsarist monarchy, and also because of the fact that in Eastern Europe and Asia the bourgeois-democratic revolution that had previously led to the creation of independent nation-states in the West had just begun. [9] To the extent that Lenin recognized that national emancipation for Poland, Ukraine and other nations was an unfinished bourgeois-democratic task that required completion, his position is indeed similar to that of Kautsky. However, as will become clear in this part of my essay, Lenin's position differed significantly from Kautsky's.

Lenin was a strict advocate of equal rights for all nationalities in a state. Unlike the Austro-Marxists, he did not view nationalism per se positively; his support for national movements was negative in the sense that he wanted the oppression of national minorities to stop. As he put it: "The awakening of the masses from feudal lethargy, and their struggle against all national oppression, for the sovereignty of the people, of the nation, are progressive. Hence, it is the Marxist's bounden duty to stand for the most resolute and consistent democratism on all aspects of the national question. This task is largely a negative one. But this is the limit the proletariat can go to in supporting nationalism, for beyond that begins the "positive" activity of the bourgeoisie striving to fortify nationalism." [10] He recognised that nationalism was progressive and in the interests of the proletarian class struggle only insofar as it was an expression of the bourgeois-democratic struggle against feudal national oppression and the feudal privileges enjoyed by certain nations or languages. Working class support for the bourgeoisie on the national question had to be limited to these negative objectives: "The working class supports the bourgeoisie only in order to secure national peace (which the bourgeoisie cannot bring about completely and which can be achieved only with complete democracy), in order to secure equal rights and to create the best conditions for the class struggle." [11]

As this last formulation shows, Lenin's position on the national question was guided by the interests of the proletarian class struggle. Indeed, like Marx, Engels, Luxemburg and Kautsky, Lenin approached the national question primarily strategically. His support for the right of nations to self-determination was strategic, not a principled position as is usually presented: "While recognising equality and equal rights to a national state, it values above all and places foremost the alliance of the proletarians of all nations, and assesses any national demand, any national separation, from the angle of the workers' class struggle." [12] Most importantly, Lenin's strategic reason for supporting this right was different from Kautsky's. Kautsky supported self-determination because he genuinely believed that the independence of nations would advance the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Eastern Europe in the same way that it advanced it in Western Europe. So he wanted that independence to become a

reality. Lenin, however, did not support self-determination mainly for this reason; he did not expect Eastern Europe to repeat the long bourgeois-democratic development of Western Europe. He supported, instead, the right of nations to self-determination as a means of unifying the working class in multinational states like Russia.

Lenin believed that the defence of the right of self-determination was necessary as a means of unifying the working class in a multi-ethnic state. Unlike Kautsky, he did not aim for independence as such, and considered the legitimacy of independence a secondary issue to be decided on a case-by-case basis.[13] Before the 1917 revolution, the Bolsheviks did not take a position for or against the independence of Poland, Ukraine or Finland. In response to Luxemburg, Lenin argued that her abstract internationalist propaganda was insufficient to convince ethnic minorities such as the Poles and Ukrainians that the great Russian socialists were truly internationalist. He stressed that the labour movement of each oppressed nation should demonstrate in its programme and in practice that it supported the right of oppressed nations to independence. This is necessary to win the confidence of the workers of the oppressed nations: "The proletariat of the oppressing nations cannot confine itself to the general hackneyed phrases against annexations and for the equal rights of nations in general, that may be repeated by any pacifist bourgeois...The proletariat must demand the right of political secession for the colonies and for the nations that "its own" nation oppresses. Unless it does this, proletarian internationalism will remain a meaningless phrase; mutual confidence and class solidarity between the workers of the oppressing and oppressed nations will be impossible; the hypocrisy of the reformist and Kautskyan advocates of self-determination who maintain silence about the nations which are oppressed by "their" nation and forcibly retained within "their" state will remain unexposed." [14]

The following extensive excerpt from Lenin's *The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Self-Determination of Nations* is particularly informative: "The right of nations to self-determination means only the right to independence in a political sense, the right to free, political secession from the oppressing nation. Concretely, this political, democratic demand implies complete freedom to carry on agitation in favour of secession, and freedom to settle the question of secession by means of a referendum of the nation that desires to secede. Consequently, this demand is by no means identical with the demand for secession, for partition, for the formation of small states. It is merely the logical expression of the struggle against national oppression in every form. The more closely the democratic system of state approximates to complete freedom of secession, the rarer and weaker will the striving for secession be in practice; for the advantages of large states, both from the point of view of economic progress and from the point of view of the interests of the masses, are beyond doubt, and these advantages increase with the growth of capitalism. The recognition of self-determination is not the same as making federation a principle. One may be a determined opponent of this principle and a partisan of democratic centralism and yet prefer federation to national inequality as the only path towards complete democratic centralism. It was precisely from this point of view that Marx, although a centralist, preferred even the federation of Ireland with England to the forcible subjection of Ireland to the English."

In other words, Lenin's support for the right of nations to self-determination does not imply support for secession. Lenin was not necessarily a supporter of secession, but he respected the right of all nationalities to independence if they wanted it. Indeed, he hoped that by supporting the right of self-determination and fighting ethnic oppression, ethnic oppression would be reduced and minority nations would be more likely to remain in their multi-ethnic states and cooperate with the proletariat of the dominant nation for socialism.[15] The Stalinists and New Leftists misrepresent Lenin when they portray him as a supporter of any demand put forward by an oppressed ethnic minority. They magnify his disagreement with Luxemburg and overlook his anti-nationalism. Lenin believed that

large states are in the interests of both economic progress and socialism, although sometimes secession is inevitable to overcome ethnic hostility and inequality, as in the case of Ireland.

Because Lenin's ultimate goal on the national question was the unity of the proletarians of all nations in the struggle against the Tsar and for Socialism, he strongly opposed cultural-national autonomy. He argued that the defence of cultural-ethnic autonomy divided the working class and brought the working and bourgeois classes of a nation closer together.[16] He insisted that the working classes of all nations in Russia had to work together to overcome Tsarism and establish a democracy with equal rights for all nationalities, convinced that such a democratic struggle would unite the proletariat of the various nations. On the other hand, he criticized cultural-national autonomy for promoting the isolation of nations in the fields of culture and education, an isolation compatible with the preservation of national privileges.[17] Like Luxemburg, he opposed federalism and favoured only limited regional autonomy for minority nations in a unitary state: "All areas of the state that are distinguished by social peculiarities or by the national composition of the population, must enjoy wide self-government and autonomy..."[18]. Lenin was also adamant that the proletarian organisations of any country, e.g. the party, trade unions, etc., should not be segregated on the basis of nationality. He was against party forms with separate ethnic groups like the Jewish Bund.[19]

It is important to note here that Lenin was categorically opposed to the promotion of any national culture, considering such promotion to be contrary to Marxism. He agreed with the verdict of Marx and Engels in the Manifesto that under capitalism, "all economic, political and spiritual life is becoming more and more international", making national cultures a relic of the past.[20] Capitalism inevitably leads to globalisation: "capitalism's world-historical tendency, to break down national barriers, obliterate national distinctions, and to assimilate nations"[21]. Lenin, following Marx and Engels, considered this globalising tendency to be progressive, "one of the greatest driving forces transforming capitalism into socialism". Globalisation is one of the preconditions for socialism, after all. As Lenin underlines: "No one unobsessed by nationalist prejudices can fail to perceive that this process of assimilation of nations by capitalism means the greatest historical progress, the break down of hidebound national conservatism in the various backwoods, especially in backward countries like Russia."

Socialism would complete globalisation by making life "completely international". The proletariat would create a new international culture that would accept only the democratic and socialist elements of other cultures. In other words, you cannot be a historical materialist committed to socialism and progress and at the same time advocate the preservation of national culture, as Bauer and Renner did.[23] Socialists seek the fusion of all nations into a world communist society of maximum freedom. Lenin shared this goal, but he also dialectically recognized that to achieve the transcendence of nationality there must be a transitional period in which all oppressed nations are fully free, i.e. have the possibility of self-determination: "Just as mankind can achieve the abolition of classes only by passing through the transition period of the dictatorship of the oppressed class, so mankind can achieve the inevitable merging of nations only by passing through the transition period of complete liberation of all the oppressed nations, i.e., their freedom to secede."[24]

Overall, Lenin's position on the national question is strategic and more complex than it first appears. It may appear to some as a schizophrenic "all or nothing" position that accepts only national independence or national assimilation, but its strategy is clear and aligned with Marx and Engels. Lenin's aim was to promote working class unity in the Tsarist state. If the working classes of different nations were willing to struggle together within the same state framework, the task of the Marxists was to overcome all national barriers between those classes, facilitating their gradual, organic assimilation. If the working classes of certain nations were too hostile to each other to wage class

struggle unitedly, it was preferable to divide them into separate independent states. In every case, the aim was to accelerate the class struggle.

*** Marxism and the Cyprus problem**

From the above it is clear that a Marxist approach to the Cyprus problem can only be strategic. The question for Marxists is how the Cyprus problem can be instrumentalised in favour of the task of world revolution, or at least, to recognise and support the approach or solution to the problem that is most favourable to the revolutionary task. An obvious problem arises here: there is no international revolutionary movement today and any mention of a socialist revolution sounds utopian and anachronistic. This social condition leads to the following legitimate questions: Is the traditional Marxist approach to the national question relevant in the 21st century? Doesn't this approach at least need an update? Is Marxism itself irrelevant to contemporary national issues?

I consider it an indisputable fact that the Left, including the Marxist Left, failed miserably in the 20th century.[25] There were no successful socialist revolutions in the 20th century and by the end of it the workers' movement was literally non-existent. The state of the world thus differs dramatically from the time when Marx, Engels, Lenin and others were writing about the national question. There are no prospects for a socialist revolution on the scene, nor any workers' movement that can be supported by developments in national conflicts. The Marxist left is dead and most likely will not be resurrected. Consequently, a view that argues that the traditional Marxist approach to the national question is irrelevant to the Cyprus problem is perfectly reasonable and difficult to challenge. It is beyond the scope of this essay to argue for the viability of Marxism in the 21st century, so I will not attempt to do so.

Instead, I take Marxism for granted and my essay is only about those who identify themselves as Marxists or at least as revolutionary leftists. I also take the following point for granted: one cannot be a Marxist if one does not consider the socialist revolution possible and necessary and if the goal of the socialist revolution does not guide one's political positions and actions. Consequently, I believe that Marxism still requires a strategic approach to national conflicts such as the Cyprus problem. However, given the lack of revolutionary prospects and the absence of a workers' movement in Cyprus and internationally, it is impossible to link the Cyprus problem directly to the revolution. What I believe we can do is to link the Cyprus problem with the reconstitution of a workers' movement and a Marxist left in Cyprus. Lenin's ultimate goal in relation to the national question was the unity of the proletarians of all nations in the struggle against Tsarism and in support of socialism. Cypriot Marxists can have the same goal with regard to the Cypriot problem. We should try to politicise the Cyprus problem in a way that promotes the unity of the Cypriot proletarians and the formation of a workers' struggle, and we should advocate the approach or solution to the problem that is most favourable to that unity and formation.

Most Cypriot Marxists and revolutionary leftists would not disagree with the above formulation of what our goal should be in relation to the Cyprus problem. Some Cypriot far-left groups even refer to this goal. The real question is how this objective informs our practice and what political positions it leads us to adopt in relation to the problem. I move on to examine the most recent positions issued on the Cyprus problem by some of the far-left Cypriot groups that claim to have this objective as one of their goals. (As for those on the left who have adopted a liberal perspective on the Cyprus problem -and they are the vast majority- I have no objection to their stance given that Marxism and revolution do not seem viable today. However, I do find it a problem that some of them continue to call themselves Marxists or revolutionary leftists, as they are nothing of the sort. Leftists who support BBF on the grounds that it will bring national peace are expressing nothing more than a liberal position and need

to acknowledge this.)

- Greek Cypriot Far-Leftists and the Cyprus Problem

I will start with the positions of Syspirosi Atakton and Antifa Lefkoşa, two mostly anti-fascist and inter-sectional groups with similar views on the Cyprus problem.[26] Both groups support a BBF solution on the grounds that such a solution is necessary to overcome the political hegemony of nationalism on the island. Antifa argues that a federal solution is only transitional, a necessary transitional step towards a collective bicomunal struggle against capitalism. Syspirosi claims that the construction of the Cyprus problem in the 1950s led to the domination of nationalism in Cypriot politics, and both they and Antifa note that as long as the Cyprus problem exists and dominates politics, political life on the island will be under the political hegemony of nationalism and inter-communal conflict. Both groups claim that a federal solution is a break with the forces of nationalism: BBF is anathema to Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot nationalists. According to Antifa, the federation will give birth to a “federal consciousness” which is by definition anti-national and which it considers necessary to overcome nationalism in Cyprus. This consciousness is defined by the recognition that Cyprus is not a homogeneous nation-state, but the home of many communities. Such a consciousness creates the possibility for class struggle to replace ethnic conflict. In a similar way, Syspirosi claims that federation will facilitate bicomunal struggles. Both groups position themselves against a unitary Cypriot nation-state on the grounds that it will inevitably lead to the tyranny of the Turkish Cypriot minority by the Greek Cypriot majority. Syspirosi goes so far as to claim that BBF is the “ideal institutional solution” for the Cyprus problem from the left, because it simultaneously provides autonomy and space for the two communities to coexist.

My impression from reading these two texts is that the two groups are not writing from a revolutionary leftist perspective, but from an anti-right/anti-fascist perspective. They take for granted the false dilemma between BBF and the unitary state and choose BBF to go against the nationalists and right-wingers who choose the unitary state. But these two solutions are not the only ways to solve the Cyprus problem. Another form of solution, at the moment the most likely one, is some kind of partition. Partition is anathema to the overwhelming majority of the Cypriot left because they see it as an outcome of nationalism and therefore its victory. However, as Marx and Lenin recognised, if the ethnic conflict is an insurmountable obstacle to the collective class struggle of different nationalities, separating them through partition and independence is the best way to promote the possibility of class struggle in the two ethnic communities. Moreover, while I agree with Antifa and Syspirosi that as long as the Cyprus problem exists and is politically dominated, political life on the island will be under the political hegemony of nationalism and bicomunal conflict, it does not follow from this recognition that a federal solution is necessary to overcome nationalism and start the class struggle; partition could equally 'solve' the problem and end its political domination.

It should also be noted that while a bizonal bicomunal federation is indeed a rupture with Cypriot nationalists, it is not necessarily a rupture with nationalism itself. A federal solution may provoke strong nationalist reactions and even reinforce nationalist conflicts in the long run. Lambros Lmabrianou has written an article exploring this possibility and raising several valid concerns which I explore later. It is a great oversight on the part of Syspirosi and Antifa that they do not examine and refute this possibility. We cannot take it for granted that a federal solution will be a transitional step towards a collective bicomunal struggle against capitalism; it may give birth to a new cycle of nationalism and perpetuate the Cyprus problem for decades, which is not the case with partition. Not only that, but any federal solution will need a difficult transition and will indeed perpetuate the Cyprus problem for decades, as political life on the island will be dominated by the implications of the solution and the efforts made to make it work.

Finally, as far as the so-called federal consciousness is concerned, I disagree that this consciousness is by definition anti-national and therefore desirable. A federal consciousness that recognises Cyprus as the home of many communities will not necessarily overcome the national consciousness of each community. In fact, support for a federal consciousness is similar to support for cultural-ethnic autonomy. It is a consciousness that does not transcend nationality as such and does not promote the fusion of different nationalities. It is of importance that in a BBF the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities will have separate educational systems, which is a key feature of cultural-ethnic autonomy. In any case, a federal consciousness does not go beyond civic nationalism, i.e., political identities built around common citizenship within the state. Marxists advocate the cultivation of class consciousness and do not believe that there is a need for a transitional consciousness between the existing popular consciousness and the class consciousness. Federal consciousness will be another obstacle that Marxists will need to overcome to cultivate class consciousness and there is no need to create this obstacle. The effort spent on replacing the dominant Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot consciousnesses with a federal or so-called "Cypriot" consciousness should be spent on cultivating class consciousness. Therefore, it is absurd to argue that a BBF is the ideal solution to the Cyprus problem from a leftist point of view.

The Stasis Stalinist group (which no longer exists) is the only one that tried to explicitly base its support for BBF on Marxism. Specifically, it based its support for a federal solution on Lenin's writings on the national question that I summarized above[27] The Stasis group reiterates and agrees with Lenin's view that Marxists need to oppose "all national oppression or inequality" and defend the equality of the nations that make up a state entity. It also reiterates and agrees with Lenin's position that only the democratic elements of each nationality need to be promoted and that the fusion of nations on the basis of democratism and proletarian internationalism should be aimed at.

It reiterates and agrees with Lenin's position that Marxists should "identify and support the most progressive practical solutions to a national question, even within the conditions of capitalism", without postponing the solution of the questions until the achievement of socialism, but always positioning themselves in the interests of the masses and the prospect of socialist revolution. It recognises that support for the most progressive possible solutions implies a rallying of socialists and the proletariat with a portion of the bourgeoisie, and agrees with Lenin that this is acceptable as long as the proletariat does not become the tail of the bourgeoisie, identifying with its own perspective and its own aspirations on the national question. The working class holds its own internationalist aims and supports the bourgeoisie strategically, without sharing the bourgeois nationalism of the latter, supporting the latter only to the extent that the latter promotes democratisation, equality and fusion of nations. Finally, the Stasis group reiterates and agrees with Lenin's position that the unification of different nationalities within a bourgeois state is a historically progressive step "from medieval disunity to the future socialist unity".

While the above reading of Lenin is accurate, the Stasis group runs into problems when trying to apply the general principles of Lenin's position on the Cyprus problem. First, the one point on which it is partially correct: despite the fact that the current context of the Cyprus problem is determined by the bourgeoisie, Marxists are obliged to intervene and have a place in the conflict. I say partly because the radical Cypriot left is politically insignificant and cannot influence the direction of this intra-bourgeois conflict in one way or another. We must indeed have an analysis of the present context of the problem and express our support for the kind of bourgeois solution (if any) that we believe is most conducive to the unity of the multi-communal Cypriot proletariat and the foundation of a revolutionary left in Cyprus. However, we must recognise that this support will not constitute a significant political intervention in the conflict, an intervention of the kind that revolutionaries like Lenin aimed for when there was a workers' movement. What is important for us is to educate

ourselves and orient ourselves properly on the issue, understanding the present and possible future circumstances, so that we are ready to take advantage of them when they come.

Unfortunately, the Stasis group proceeds to blatantly distort Lenin's position on the national question, claiming that any approach to the Cyprus problem that accepts indirectly or directly the present de facto division of the Cypriot working class is contrary to Marxism-Leninism in principle: "Marxism-Leninism is by principle incompatible with any approach to the Cyprus Question that accepts, directly or indirectly, the de facto division of the Cyprus working class, cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious chauvinism, the refusal of equality and of the greatest possible democratism in the administration of the state." The Stasis group implies here that de facto and by extension de jure partition is in principle incompatible with Marxism's position on the national question. As we have seen above, this is far from the truth. The right of nations to self-determination implies the right to partition/secession and there is no Marxist principle against partition. Lenin posits the principle of full equality between the nations of a state, but this principle does not imply that said nations must remain in the same state if they do not want to. The Stasis group conveniently ignores Lenin's willingness to seriously consider the option of partition when the working classes of different nations are too hostile to fight together. Such hostility was the case in Cyprus in the past, so I think it is safe to assume that Lenin would have supported partition in 1958, 1964 and 1974, followed by the incorporation of Greek Cypriots into Greece and Turkish Cypriots into Turkey if that was what the two nations wanted.

More generally, the Stasis group downplays the strategic dimension of Lenin's approach to the national question, despite the fact that they acknowledge this dimension in their summary of Lenin's approach. The Stasis group states that Marxists ought to position themselves on national questions in the interests of the cause of the socialist revolution, but ends up presenting Lenin's approach to the national question as a set of principles, undermining the strategic element despite the fact that this element is the central component of the approach. Because of this error, the Stasis group ends up turning Lenin's view that the unification of nations is desirable into the unconditional principle that partition must be avoided at all costs. In fact, the Stasis group's position is closer to Luxemburg than to Lenin, though of course the strategic dimension of the former is absent.

As far as the Stasis Group's analysis of the specifics of the Cyprus problem is concerned, its main point is that a federal Cyprus would be a bourgeois-democratic progress. The reason they give for this view is that Greece and Turkey have a conservative influence on the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot bourgeoisie respectively, exporting nationalism, militarism, fascism and NATO imperialism to the island. A federal Cyprus would mean the independence of the Cypriot ruling class from the ruling classes of the two 'mother countries' and is likely to make that class more progressive, promote the democratisation of the island and make it more likely for the working class to gain certain "basic freedoms". For my part, I really doubt that the Cypriot bourgeoisie will become more progressive in a federal Cyprus or that it will offer basic freedoms to the working class. Perhaps the assumption can be made that the Turkish Cypriot bourgeoisie will be allowed to behave more progressively, as they are indeed less reactionary than the fascistic Erdogan government. But I don't think the Greek ruling class is more reactionary than the Greek Cypriot one. It is possible that a federal Cyprus will reduce nationalism and militarism (more on this below), creating space for class struggle, but the working class will only gain freedoms through radicalisation by a strong Cypriot left. We cannot expect our bourgeoisie to become more progressive in the 21st century when the trend has been in the opposite direction for many decades. And it is certain that a federal Cyprus, like any Cyprus under capitalism, will be part of the machinations of world imperialism.

The rest of the Stasis Group's analysis of the Cyprus problem has little contact with reality. It argues that if we do not have a bicommunal state but instead a partition, then the Greek Cypriot and Turkish

Cypriot states will be occupied by the “reactionary NATOist states” of Greece and Turkey. In my opinion, there is no possibility of the Republic of Cyprus being absorbed by Greece, although it is possible for Turkey to absorb the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. But this absorption is not a fait accompli: if the TRNC is internationally recognised, its dependence on Turkey can be reduced. In any case, a federal Cyprus would be no less reactionary than Greece and would very likely become part of NATO. Joining NATO is anathema to the Stasis group, but I don't understand why they think a BBF is less likely to be a member of NATO than a divided Cyprus. NATO membership will ensure peace on the island more than anything else. In general, the distinction that the Stasis group makes between the reactionary mother countries and the progressive future federal Cyprus is just post-colonial third world delirium. It also notes that because of the violent past and the de facto hostility and lack of trust between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, the future federal state must be bizonal, at least for a transitional period, to allow time and space for inter-communal trust to develop. I will discuss the possible implications of a bizonal federation below, but it is notable that Lenin is absent from the justification for bizonality here. He might have accepted bizonality if it were really a necessary means for the eventual fusion of the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot proletariat, but as I will go on to show, this is very doubtful.

Perhaps the most sober left-wing assessment of the possible negative consequences of a BBF was made by Dr Lambros Lambrianou in his article 'The painfulness of the Bizonal Bicomunal Federation compromise and its nationalist trap'.^[28] While Lambrianou's negative assessment of the BBF is not the only negative left-wing assessment, I focus on it because of its clear anti-nationalism; as most other assessments come from a nationalist perspective. Unlike the nationalists, Lambrianou ends up supporting BBF as an inevitable compromise given the current socio-political conditions. However, he stresses that BBF should only be transitional in order to have the results we expect from it, i.e. to lead to the unification of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots into a single society and thus facilitate the bicomunal struggle of the working class.

Lambrianou is particularly concerned about the dangers of the bizonality of the BBF. He believes that bizonality should be transitional and moderated by a central state that is institutionally stronger than the two constituent states of the federation: “It is necessary in a future constitution to lay those institutional foundations that not only allow but also promote the gradual transcendence of bizonality in the form of ethnically pure regions and fully restore human rights and the basic freedoms of movement, settlement and property without discrimination on the basis of nationality. In this case the strongest foundation is a strong common state in terms of its powers in relation to the powers of the constituent states.”

The bizonality of the BBF is equivalent to the existence of loose geographical borders between the two main Cypriot ethnic groups, the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots. As Lambrianou rightly points out, these geographical borders also constitute economic, political and social borders: “Political borders in the sense of non-interference in the management of the power of one zone in the other to the extent of the exclusive power granted to them by the common state and non-interference in the management of this power even by the central government. Economic frontiers in the sense of economic activity and development that is -to a certain extent- independent of the economic policy of the common state. Social borders in the sense of an ethnic division based mainly on the characteristics of religion, language and ancestry.” Lambrianou sees the bizonality of the Federation as the legitimisation of the de facto Turkish occupation of a third of the island. The Republic of Cyprus accepted bizonality as a painful but necessary compromise after the violent events on the island and the ongoing mistrust between the two communities, and Lambrianou sees bizonality in the same way. He notes that the basis of all talks to date is the conflictual relationship between the two communities. All discussions have revolved around finding a compromise on the balance of power and

the privileges of the two communities in a new state, with each side trying to reach the best possible agreement for its bourgeois national interests.

The question for Lambrianou, as well as for the rest of the left that wants reunification, is whether a BBF can be the means to overcome the aforementioned conflict between the two communities and to unify Cypriot society. In particular, his question is whether bizonality can be such a means or whether it will maintain the division and conflict of the two communities and possibly renew the nationalist conflict in the future: "If the answer is that we want the real unification of Cyprus and its society, then we must also answer the question that goes beyond the painful question of compromise: Is the bizonality of a bicomunal federation workable and viable? Or is it possible (and to what extent) that the ethnic separation of the two communities in the long run will create the ground for new conflicts? In sum, can the BBF prevent nationalism from again becoming a tool for imposing internal and external interests?" The Cypriot bourgeoisie conducting the talks sees bizonality and the safety valves it entails as a means to control and contain the conflict between the two communities, not as a means to overcome it. The Left, however, cannot accept the mere viable management of this relationship; it can only support bizonality if it can help overcome the conflictual relationship and truly reunite the two main ethnic groups of Cyprus, facilitating the collective struggle of their respective working classes.

Lambrianou argues that bizonality is not only insufficient to overcome nationalism and the Greek Cypriot-Turkish Cypriot conflict but may in fact allow nationalist tendencies in the two communities to dominate the new federation and lead to the final partition of Cyprus. According to Lambrianou, nationalism is indicated by the social boundaries that one group of people, a community or a society in general, places in relation to another, and is facilitated by such social boundaries. Specifically, it is facilitated when different communities have their own separate educational systems and socialization processes: "The nationalist outlook and the attitudes in which it materializes are not so much of an spiritual, intellectual nature as mainly of an emotional identification and its systematic long-term consolidation, which is of course constituted on the basis of an one-sided socialization, above all an one-dimensional education." The deep nationalism of the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities cannot be overcome simply by low-policy confidence-building measures between the two communities, to which we have been limited so far. It is necessary to provide the two communities with common institutional reference points that offer the possibility of common identification. These common points of reference should include: "1. A common institutional framework for the functioning of society, i.e. a common rule of law; 2. Common economic structures that provide the opportunity for the creation of common interests that touch the daily lives of people; and 3. Common cultural institutions that preserve diversity and at the same time promote its coexistence not only as a necessary component of coexistence but above all as a constituent element of a multicultural society under construction."

Lambrianou argues that a bizonal federation on the basis of ethnic difference would not provide these common institutional reference points. For him, a bizonal federation does not amount to a symbiosis of the two communities, but merely to the acceptance of the separate socio-political existence of each community by the other within the loose framework of a common state. He notes that the weaker the common state is politically in relation to its constituent states, the less likely it is to be a common point of reference and determination for the two communities. Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots will identify with their constituent states in which they will live their daily lives: "With which common state will the Cypriot citizen -Greek Cypriot or Turkish Cypriot- identify himself if the latter is truncated and unable to represent him effectively? The real point of reference and identification will obviously remain the respective 'constituent state' in the respective zone, where he will live his daily life, seek solutions to his immediate problems and confront his history through a separate one-sided

perspective, as it has been the case throughout the last century.” If the two communities mostly live separately, have separate education systems and listen to separate media, nationalism will not be overcome. Instead, it is likely that nationalist forces will take advantage of this situation to gain the upper hand and undermine the weak common state, renewing ethnic conflict on the island and leading to separation.

I generally agree with Lambrianou's assessment of the nationalist pitfalls of bizonality. While it is not certain that a BBF will preserve nationalism, this is a distinct possibility that the Cypriot radical left should take seriously and prepare against. The radical left cannot simply support any federal solution, but only one with a strong central state and which tends towards a future transcendence of bizonality. More specifically, separate education systems should be avoided if possible, as they will be open to the influence of nationalist institutions such as the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus.

Bicommunalism, i.e. the recognition of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots as equal partners in a future state, is in line with Marxism. Bizonality, on the other hand, is reminiscent of cultural-ethnic autonomy and is questionable from a Marxist point of view.

Unfortunately, as I have partially shown above, the majority of Cypriot far-left groups assume that a BBF will constitute bourgeois-democratic progress and will create better conditions for bi-communal coexistence, without having seriously considered the above counter-arguments in their assessments. These groups wrongly assume that a BBF will weaken nationalism simply because nationalists oppose it. This is an unacceptable error. By being marginalized by the nationalists, these groups end up tailing the liberals whom the nationalists oppose. They are ready to uncritically support any federal solution brought by the liberal bourgeoisie, the EU and big capital, as evidenced by the fact that they do not set any criteria that a federal state should meet. Such a position of course has nothing to do with Marxism.

In a very good article in Jacobin magazine, the Greek Cypriot leftist Leandros Fischer expresses similar scepticism towards the uncritical support of the Greek Cypriot left for the reunification talks.[29] As he notes: “It is easy to point to the utterly reactionary character of the settlement’s opponents to bolster the “reunification or bust” argument. But we should view this uncritical support for the negotiations skeptically. Not only does it dramatically overestimate the Left’s current capacity to dictate the turn of events, but it is also premised on unadulterated wishful thinking. The current RoC government has made it clear that it intends to enshrine “fiscal responsibility” in the country’s future constitution. The Left could not resist the neoliberal onslaught in one part of the country; why it should be in a better position to do so in both stands as a more than valid question. Given the precedents of so-called conflict resolution in Northern Ireland and Bosnia, a quite plausible outcome would be a situation in which capitalists and the cosmopolitan elite from both sides reap the benefits of reconciliation while ordinary working people, confined in their separate constituent states, pay the bill and become even more susceptible to ethno-populist politics. This is a potentially dangerous outcome, made even more toxic by the fact that the settlement currently under discussion fails to address the privileges of the main institutions of nationalism and their influence over educational matters, like the Orthodox Church in the south...Peace, reconciliation, and mutual recognition cannot be preconditioned on deals aimed at harmonizing the region’s capitalist class interests, with faint hopes that the working class will benefit from a peace dividend.” Also, contrary to Stasis, he correctly notes that a federal solution would not challenge the influence of imperialism in Cyprus at all.

What Lambrianou omits is that the conflictual relationship between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots can also be eliminated through partition, not only by living together in a common state. Partition has already significantly mitigated the conflict, so that today Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots can move freely across the island in relative safety. Ending the negotiating serial surrounding

the Cyprus problem will end the political domination of the problem and undermine the nationalist political forces whose raison d'être is the Cyprus problem. And of course, given that the borders between Greek and Turkish Cyprus remain open, it is possible for the left and the working class of the two communities to organise collectively despite the lack of a common state. Unfortunately, both Lambrianou and the far-left groups I mentioned before assume that partition is a disaster. This is to be expected from a liberal leftist like Lambrianou, but not from far-leftists or Marxists. It shows that despite their claims to the contrary, these groups actually see the reunification of Cyprus as an end in itself. The question for Marxism is whether a BBF will create better conditions for an intercommunal working class struggle, but this is not the question for the Greek Cypriot radical left.

I conclude the chapter with a brief reference to the attitude of two small Trotskyist groups, [Workers' Democracy](#) and the [New Internationalist Left](#) (NEDA).[30] The two groups consider the main reason for the failure to find a solution to be the conflicting interests of the ruling classes in Cyprus, Greece and Turkey, as well as the imperialist great powers, and therefore naturally consider it unacceptable that the talks should continue to depend on these classes and powers without the involvement of the working class. Both understand correctly that the ruling classes of the two communities see each other as antagonistic, and therefore, that what is at stake in the talks is which side will have the upper hand in a future agreement, not the good of a reunited Cypriot people. Therefore, both Workers' Democracy and NEDA express scepticism towards the prospect of a BBF, are pessimistic about the possibility of a viable bourgeois solution and consider the uncritical support of the vast majority of the Greek Cypriot left for the reunification talks to be naïve. Their counter-proposal is to build a bicomunal working class movement to overthrow the capitalist establishment in Cyprus and build a socialist federal Cyprus.

Unfortunately, although a bicomunal working class movement is needed in Cyprus, it is impossible to build a socialist Cyprus without a world socialist revolution, and this is not a realistic possibility in the near future. We can safely say that there will be a bourgeois solution to the Cyprus problem before there is a revolution. Therefore, Marxists cannot dismiss the bourgeois talks and developments on the Cyprus problem and put forward a socialist Cyprus as a viable alternative goal. As I have already said, they need to examine the possible contingencies of a bourgeois solution, from BBF to various partitionist settlements, and see how they can instrumentalise these contingencies for the benefit of the unity of the Cypriot proletariat and the constituting of class struggle.

- What is the Cyprus problem for Marxism

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