Ukrainian history holds lessons for Scottish socialists

Paul Inglis of ecosocialist.scot writes on Marko Bocjun's recent book *The Workers' Movement and the National Question in Ukraine, 1897-1918*

The *Historical Materialism* book series has been the source of a number of useful works for my political thinking over the years. Previous volumes I've encountered, like Alan Sennett's book on Revolutionary Marxism in the Spanish revolution and Ralf Hoffrogge's book on Richard Müller and the German workers' councils, have served as both examples of erudite scholarship and as powerful influences on the way I think about socialist politics, strategy and tactics. One of the latest entries in the series, Marko Bojcun's *The Workers' Movement and the National Question in Ukraine, 1897-1918*, looks set to hold a similar place in my estimation going forward.

This book presents a fascinating account of a lesser-known movement for leftists today, telling the fraught story of the Ukrainian working class movement, its political parties and organisations, and how they faced up to the national question amid the revolutionary tumult of the year 1917. Reading the book, it is like hearing about something of a lost world – tendencies and movements shrouded by the success of the Bolsheviks in the conflicts that followed the collapse of the Russian Empire. Furthermore, it is simply solid, detailed writing on the national question, and like any good writing on the national question, it has a relevance that leaps beyond its own subject matter and which sheds light on other national struggles and movements, past and present.

As someone who has hitched my political commitments as a socialist to the opportunities and risks presented by the cause of Scottish independence, I am always interested to learn more about national movements from all over the world: how they organised, how they fought, what kind of compromises they made, and especially where they failed. In short, lessons of history! I think it is a shame that for a lot of the left and the national movement more broadly here in Scotland, there is a tendency to act like the only comparable situations for us are Catalunya, the Basque Country and Quebec, presumably because these are contemporary movements in Western nations.

As long as we don't pretend there are any directly, exactly comparable situations, we can take valuable lessons from national movements both here and across the Global South, and from across history – specifically lessons pertaining to questions of approach and attitude. How does the working class get involved with national movements? How do we bring the class on board? What attitude should we take towards the moderate or liberal political parties and groups? How do we manage to get socialists from the larger nation, in our case England, to consider our national movement seriously and enlist their support? These are questions that face us today as they faced the Ukrainian socialists.

Bojcun's book contains much on the specific historical difficulties of Ukrainian socialism and nationalism and the lessons gathered therein, but I wanted to focus this short article on some of the questions and thoughts about Marxism that I had running through my mind as I read the work, particularly the discussions in the third chapter on *Social Democracy and the National Question*.

It is very useful that this book not only gives a historical narrative of Ukrainian socialism, but also addresses theoretical concerns, problematising classical Marxist thinking on the national question – Marx, Engels, Kautsky, Lenin and Luxemburg – and subjecting them to analysis and

criticism in the light of contemporary nationalist movements in Eastern Europe. I was excited to see this as I have in recent years, especially as I have become more interested in the national question, come to believe that there is an unfortunate weakness in the Marxist “canon” where the national question is concerned, one that plagues it to this day. Where thinkers like Marx or Engels can be thrilling and enlightening on a wealth of matters, they can be flippant, arbitrary and cruel when speaking about the fate of “smaller” nations.

Take, for example, the remarks from Marx’s early work, quoted by the author, on how Scots, Gaels and Basques are “historically unprepared for nationhood”, national leftovers that “will become and will remain until their final extermination or denationalisation fanatical partisans of counterrevolution, since their entire existence is in general a protest against the great historical revolution”. The thoughts of Engels on the South Slavs, which I first encountered in Mark Leier’s excellent biography of Mikhail Bakunin, are a similarly crass diatribe.

In this conception, the smaller nations of the world were simply written off as barriers to the centralising tendency of capitalism towards more unified, larger states and, apparently, a more effective and efficient development of the productive forces conducive to building socialism.

What use is any of this to socialists in these smaller nations? Leaving aside the more complex tapestry of uneven economic development that resulted from the spread of global, imperialist capitalism and which calls into question the effective base for socialism that such great power “assimilation” has given us, the brutal reality of how stateless people have been forcibly integrated into larger nations through repression should give us all pause when we read of “denationalisation” and the like. No culture disappears from the scene of history cleanly, and no language simply dies out gently.

Now, to their credit, Marx and Engels of course came to a more sophisticated position on small nations in their later years, particularly regarding Irish freedom, but the "great power assimilationist" tendency in Marxism still runs through the thought of Kautsky, Lenin and Luxemburg, as the author shows. I quite enjoyed the exploration of the ambiguities of Lenin's writing on the right of nations to self determination, and the criticisms of the Ukrainian socialist Lev Yurkevych on this matter – how Lenin sort-of wants to have his cake and eat it by both supporting the right to national self determination but also discouraging it, lauding the advantages of big states and bourgeois development. Another area of Yurkevych's criticism looked at Lenin's assertion that the achievement of democratic multinational states would see strivings for complete freedom of secession weaken.

This, considered in light of the modern day, feels like wishful thinking. The national question is alive and well in multinational democracies like the United Kingdom and Spain, and even if it is countered that this fact is only because of democratic deficits in these big states, it should be kept in mind that the centralising tendency of states like the United Kingdom and Spain has precluded the kind of genuine national autonomy that would render secession irrelevant. One need only think of the "fruits" yielded by Spanish democracy to the Basques in the 1980s, and how they can be measured in murdered, tortured and unlawfully detained independence activists.

What I feel all of this criticism poses, and what I would hope all of you bear in mind as you read this work, and other works like it, is: how do we overcome this weakness in Marxist theory, and how do we do better in the future? How do we conceive a radical alternative to the current state of affairs that genuinely grants self-determination and security to national cultures, no matter how small? This is especially pertinent for us Scots, because we absolutely must make sure

that, whatever Scotland emerges from the next period, the Gaelic language and culture is preserved and supported, and that the Gaels have whatever autonomy they feel is appropriate. To do otherwise would be to continue the historical record of the British state.

Watch a recording of the full event with Marko Bojcun below

Paul Inglis is a member of the RSP and Socialist Resistance, based in Glasgow. This article is adapted from Paul's spoken contribution at a joint RSP/SR meeting in September 2021 to discuss Bojcun's book.

Ukraine, Marxism and the National Question: A Conversation With Marko Bojcun – YouTube

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