Social Democracy and the National Question

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Combined English translation extracted from the uploaded Segment 4 and Segment 5 PDFs; source printed pages 173-219.

[Source printed page 173]

Social democracy has undoubtedly occupied itself with the national question less than with almost any other important political question. Bourgeois scholars, politicians, and journalists have created a rich literature on the national question, a literature that continues energetically to develop, deepen, and propagate bourgeois views. Social democracy, by contrast, has devoted comparatively little attention to this question.

Social-democratic literature possesses only a small number of works that deal seriously and thoroughly with the national question. These works do not exhaust the complicated and difficult problem. At every step, even today, many points remain unclarified from a strictly social-democratic standpoint - not only details of concrete practical policy, but also some general concepts, the starting points from which the question itself must be understood.

It is unpleasant to hear, in social-democratic literature, echoes of concepts and moods that rule in the bourgeois world and make their way into the camp of the proletariat because of the weakness of its theoretical defenses. Sometimes these echoes appear in nationalist tones, sometimes in assimilationist moods, sometimes in terminology and slogans bearing the bourgeois stamp. This confusion is not chiefly the result of the complexity of the question itself. Complexity makes it harder to find concrete answers, but it does not prevent us from posing the question in harmony with the general principles of socialism.

[Additional material from printed pages 173-178]

Medem's opening argument is directed not only against political opponents but also against negligence within the socialist camp itself. He does not say that social democracy lacks principles. Rather, he argues that on the national question it has often failed to apply its principles rigorously. Where theory is weak, borrowed language enters. Socialists begin to repeat bourgeois formulas without noticing it. They speak of nations as if nations were natural persons with a single will; or they speak of assimilation as if the disappearance of a minority were automatically progress.

His method is Marxist in the broad sense: the national question must be derived from social relations, from the development of capitalism, from the state, the market, and class interests. It cannot be solved by moral phrases alone. Nor can it be dismissed as a mere illusion. National life is real because language, school, administration, economic life, and historical memory are real. The problem is to understand how these realities are shaped by class society and how the proletariat should respond to them.

Medem is especially careful not to confuse two different things: the free interaction of cultures and forced denationalization. No living culture is pure. Every people borrows words, ideas, techniques, and forms from others. Such exchange is not oppression. Oppression begins when one group uses state power, social contempt, or economic pressure to make another group abandon its own language and institutions. Assimilation then becomes the cultural form of inequality.

This distinction is crucial for the Jewish question. Jews in modern Europe did not live outside general society. They entered modern economic and intellectual life; they learned surrounding languages; they participated in broader political movements. But the demand that they cease to be a Jewish collective in order to be fully accepted was not a neutral cultural process. It was a demand made under conditions of unequal power.

Medem therefore rejects the sentimental defense of separateness and the sentimental praise of dissolution alike. The question is not whether difference is beautiful in itself or whether sameness is convenient. The question is whether human beings and groups are free. A democratic order must allow the Jewish masses to educate their children, use their language, organize their communal and cultural life, and participate in common civic life without surrendering their collective face.

[Source printed page 174]

The real cause of the confusion lies rather in the fact that the greater part of social democracy has given the national question too little attention. The question has therefore often been left to bourgeois ideology, which has filled the empty space with its own categories. When the proletarian movement does not work out its own concepts, it unconsciously borrows the concepts of its adversaries.

The national question of our time was created by the development of modern capitalism. Earlier societies knew differences of tribe, language, religion, and province, but modern capitalism tore down old barriers and tied territories together through the market, communications, state administration, schools, and the press. Peoples that had lived separately were drawn into new relations; old local worlds were broken up; new collective consciousness arose.

This process did not produce a peaceful harmony of nations. It produced conflict. The bourgeois order united territories and markets, but it also created dominant nations and subordinated nations. It gave some peoples state power, schools, bureaucracy, and army; it left others exposed to pressure, denationalization, and exclusion. Thus the national question became one of the sharpest contradictions of bourgeois society.

[Source printed page 175]

Nationalism seized hold of all peoples. The assimilationist tendency is, by comparison, a rarer fruit, and nowhere does it flourish as strongly as on Jewish soil. It is therefore useful to examine it there. The Jewish case shows with special clarity the connection between modern emancipation, bourgeois equality, and the pressure to dissolve a minority into the dominant nation.

The old ghetto walls fell. The Jew entered the modern world. Formally he became a citizen like others. Apart from religion and nationality he too was a "world citizen," as the German or Frenchman was. The Jew became, so to speak, "kosher" for modern society and could be counted among the new bearers of opinion in the world. In practice, however, emancipation did not abolish the Jewish question. It merely changed its form.

The assimilator concluded that the Jew's path to equality lay through abandonment of his distinctive collective features. If the Jew would give up his language, his communal separateness, his historical memories, and his national individuality, he would become part of the surrounding people. Assimilation thus presented itself as a road to freedom, but in reality it often demanded self-renunciation as the price of civic rights.

[Source printed page 176]

The new economic order built thousands of bridges between Jews and their surroundings. The Jew was no longer locked within the medieval walls. He entered the professions, the schools, public life, the press, and the market. But the hatred and contempt of his persecutors also accompanied him. The very people who invited him to become "like everyone else" often reminded him that he was still different.

Assimilation therefore did not simply grow from free cultural exchange. It was fed by pressure from without and by shame from within. A persecuted minority, seeking security and dignity, could be tempted to surrender its own face. The surrounding society encouraged the surrender while never fully accepting the convert. Thus assimilation produced both illusions and wounds.

The ordinary scale of cultural and political values no longer suffices here. One must ask: according to whose measure is a language backward, a culture inferior, a national feature harmful? The assimilator often takes the measure of the ruling nation as the universal measure of culture. What is mine appears normal; what is yours appears provincial, strange, or obstructive. This hidden standard is the bourgeois root of assimilationist thinking.

[Source printed pages 177-178]

The assimilator therefore seems to oppose nationalism, but in fact he shares with nationalism the same fundamental division between "mine" and "the other's." Regarding his own majority people he may be a nationalist; regarding the minority he demands assimilation. A Russian assimilationist with respect to Jews may be a Russian nationalist with respect to the Russian people. The contradiction is only apparent. Both positions arise from the same bourgeois conception of culture as the property of a dominant national collective.

Assimilation, when it is merely the natural adoption of useful cultural elements, is not the problem. Every people borrows, learns, and transforms. Cultures live by exchange. The problem begins when one national group demands that another surrender its individuality, language, and institutions in order to be admitted to equality. Then assimilation becomes a policy of domination.

A democratic socialist cannot accept such a demand. The task is not to make all peoples colorless copies of the dominant nation. The task is to create conditions in which every people and every class can develop freely and enter into common human life without compulsion. Equality does not mean that the small must become the large, or that the weak must imitate the strong. Equality means the removal of privileges and obstacles.

[Source printed pages 179-180]

To achieve its aim, assimilationist policy often seeks more than legal equality. It is not content with abolishing discriminatory barriers. It wishes, by law, administration, school policy, and social pressure, to mix the "foreign" group into the ruling nation by force and to destroy everything that forms its national physiognomy - above all differences of language. The school becomes one of its chief instruments.

The ruling nation usually calls this process civilization, progress, or state unity. It claims that a single language and culture are necessary for public life. But behind these arguments there often stands the interest of the majority nation, which wishes to monopolize the state and the cultural apparatus. The minority is told that it may be free only when it ceases to be itself.

Against this stands nationalism in the narrower sense. Nationalism begins, especially among oppressed peoples, as a defense against assimilation and oppression. It says: we too exist; we too have a language, history, and collective

dignity; we too demand rights. In this defensive form it may express a genuine democratic need. But under bourgeois conditions it easily changes its character.

[Additional material from printed pages 179-186]

The examples Medem invokes from European history show that no bourgeois nation is innocent by nature. A nation that complains of oppression when weak may oppress others when strong. The Magyars who fought Vienna could deny rights to Slavs and Romanians; Germans could defend themselves in one region and Germanize others elsewhere; Slavic movements could present themselves as liberation while dreaming of their own supremacy. The moral content of a national movement therefore depends not on the name of the nation but on the social relations and political aims embodied in it.

For social democracy this means that support for national rights must never become support for bourgeois national domination. The proletariat must oppose every privilege of one nation over another, but it must also resist being absorbed into the political projects of its own bourgeoisie. The worker belongs to a language and culture, but also to a class whose interests cross national borders. The difficulty of the national question lies precisely in holding these truths together.

Medem's discussion of Renan is important because it shows his awareness of the emotional depth of national life. Nations are not merely administrative units. They live in memory, sacrifice, pride, grief, and common will. A purely mechanical theory that ignores these feelings cannot understand why people fight for language, schools, and recognition. But a socialist must also see how ruling classes exploit these feelings. The memory of sacrifice can become a demand for new sacrifices; the common will can be manufactured by school, church, army, and press; the love of one's people can be turned into hatred of another.

The proletarian answer must therefore be double. It must defend the oppressed nationality against coercion, contempt, and denationalization. At the same time it must strip national sentiment of its bourgeois mysticism. A people does not become sacred above criticism because it has suffered. No nation has a mission that permits it to dominate others. The rights of one people end where the equal rights of another begin.

In the Jewish case this standpoint leads neither to assimilation nor to Zionist nationalism. It leads to cultural-national autonomy: recognition that the Jewish masses form a real national-cultural community, even without a territory of their own, and that they require institutions corresponding to that reality. But those institutions must be democratic, secular, and bound to the struggle of the working class. They are not a substitute for socialism; they are one of the forms through which the Jewish proletariat enters socialism consciously.

[Source printed page 181]

A nationality fighting oppression may, once it gains strength, seek to become a state nation with its own apparatus of officials, schools, army, and police. The longing for self-defense is transformed into the longing for domination. The same people that yesterday demanded freedom may tomorrow deny freedom to minorities under its control. History gives many examples: Magyars, Germans, Slavs, Poles, and others have all, in different circumstances, been both oppressed and oppressors.

Thus the struggle of nationalities in bourgeois society does not by itself lead beyond bourgeois society. It reproduces the same contradictions on new ground. The oppressed bourgeoisie of one nation wants its own market, administration, and cultural monopoly. It speaks the language of liberation, but its liberation may mean the creation of a new prison for others.

This does not mean that social democracy should be indifferent to national oppression. On the contrary, it must fight every form of national inequality. But it must do so from its own standpoint, not from the standpoint of bourgeois nationalism. It must defend the rights of peoples without sanctifying the bourgeois nation-state as the final form of human association.

[Source printed pages 182-183]

The bourgeois nationalist becomes a fervent worshiper of political independence. A people, for him, is not complete until it is enclosed within a fixed border and equipped with a separate state organization, its own officials, its own military force, and all the symbols of sovereignty. He becomes a fanatical admirer of the state because the state appears to him as the embodiment of the nation's historical mission.

When such nationalism grows powerful, it becomes imperialist. It stands on a mighty army and fleet. Boastful and aggressive, it uses sonorous but empty phrases. It rattles the sword and embodies in an armored fist the "great idea" of a national historical task. The people, once presented as a community of culture, is now represented by generals, diplomats, and colonial ambitions.

Here the bourgeois character of nationalism becomes visible in its most concentrated form. The nation is treated as a supra-class personality with interests above all class divisions. Workers are asked to sacrifice for "their" nation, even when the sacrifices serve the bourgeoisie. The language of national unity becomes a means of covering exploitation and conquest.

[Source printed pages 184-185]

Let us draw the bottom line. Assimilationism and nationalism appear to be enemies, but both are rooted in the bourgeois evaluation of social values. The content of that measure is the division between mine and someone else's. That is why the assimilator regarding Jews can be a nationalist regarding Russians; why the defender of his own nation can be indifferent or hostile to the rights of another.

The proletarian standpoint must be different. The proletariat has no interest in preserving privileges of one nation over another. It cannot accept forced assimilation, because forced assimilation strengthens the dominant bourgeois nation. It cannot accept bourgeois nationalism, because bourgeois nationalism subordinates the workers to their own bourgeoisie. The working class must demand full equality of nations and full freedom of cultural development, while keeping its class independence.

The national question must therefore be reformulated. It is not a question of sentimental love or hatred toward this or that people. It is a question of social forms, rights, institutions, and the conditions under which human beings can develop. The proletariat must ask: what arrangement weakens oppression, strengthens democracy, and enables the working masses of every people to organize and educate themselves?

[Source printed page 186]

Renan famously spoke of the nation as a spiritual principle, the result of sacred feelings for sacrifices already made and for sacrifices still to be made in the future: to have a common great

name in the past, a common will in the present, to have done great things together and to wish to do them again. Medem cites this conception because it shows how strongly national ideology rests on memory, will, and moral sentiment, not merely on blood or language.

But precisely such definitions must be handled critically. The bourgeois politician turns them into a cult. He asks workers to honor the sacrifices of the past by making new sacrifices for the same ruling classes. He turns historical memory into a demand for obedience. The socialist must distinguish between the real cultural and historical bonds among people and the political use made of those bonds by ruling classes.

[Source printed pages 187-191]

In its theory and in its practice, social democracy proceeds from a single fundamental principle: the proletarian class struggle. This is not merely the chief basis of all our work; it is the only basis. The fact that we have only one foundation beneath our whole social and political structure is one of the most important conditions that lead the proletarian party toward success. The class struggle of the proletariat, and the interest of its broadest development, is the chief measuring rod by which all phenomena of social and political life are judged, all tasks which that life sets before us, and all methods proposed for solving them. We apply this highest criterion to every question. According to it we assess, distinguish, and assign to each question its proper place in the general, unified Marxist system of social-democratic politics. We approach the national question with the same measure. We subordinate it to this measure, take it into the general chain of our whole system, and make it one particular link in that chain.

The nationalist, inflamed by the interests of the market, turns nationalism into a principle and gives it absolute value. The assimilationist, whose eyes are fixed upon foreign markets and foreign forms, tries to efface his own national shape. We, who do not chase after markets, who are alien to the quarrels of bourgeois groups competing with one another, who are far from the struggle for dominion over foreign lands, do not bow before the idol of nationalism. We do not make national peculiarity into a religion. But neither do we kneel before assimilation. We strive neither to preserve by force the distinctive national traits, nor to uproot the national spirit. Our interests and tasks lie in a wholly different sphere. As long as we remain faithful to our principles, we cannot build a bridge over the current of nationalist and assimilationist tendencies.

What are the tasks and aims of a nation? In what direction ought national development to be guided? Questions of this kind simply do not exist for us in that form, just as the class interests which have produced them do not exist for us as binding principles. Our tasks lie in another sphere. We ask our questions otherwise.

First of all, let us understand the matter correctly. What is national culture? What is the national principle, the idol of the bourgeois ideologue? Where is the hidden, mystical national

spirit? A national culture as an independent thing, as a closed circle with its own separate content, does not exist at all. What is national is the particular form into which a generally human content is poured. The content of cultural life, which is in essence common everywhere, assumes different colorings, different national forms, because it enters into different groups with different social relations. The conditions in which social tasks are posed and answered, in which social conflicts are played out, and in which spiritual currents ripen, stamp culture with a national mark. The ray of social life and social struggle itself takes on a particular color as it passes through a group with a particular national coloring.

Life develops, relations change, ideas clash, and within this tangled and difficult process lies the body of social development - more precisely, its main spring: the class struggle. We direct our forces toward that mechanism and want it to work as our interests require. Hostile forces pull in another direction. We struggle. Around the basic principle of that struggle are grouped all the elements that grow out of it: laws, regulations, spiritual currents, psychological types, and the whole mass of cultural and political forms. But these are not independent national substances. They are forms in which the social content appears.

What importance, then, does difference of skin or outward form have for us? Must we concern ourselves that every difference should persist, that one or another body be wrapped in peculiar forms? Must we take care that differences grow stronger and remain forever? Certainly not. We are not nationalists. But do we look askance at those differences? Is it important for us that all bodies be wrapped in the same skin, that all national shapes take on one form? Certainly not. We are not assimilationists.

We carry on the class struggle. We press upon the most important spring and give the main stream a definite direction. Here lie our tasks and our aims. We clear away everything that prevents us from directing the mechanism according to our needs. From this standpoint we evaluate every phenomenon. In the course of its development, the class struggle assumes various national forms; it wraps itself in a particular veil, and the ray colors itself with one or another national color. That is already outside the circle of our aims. Those are the results of a blind process over which we have no direct command. The mistake of nationalists and assimilationists is that they take these results for aims.

If history has decreed that Jews are to assimilate among other peoples, we on our side will not expend forces either to halt that process or to support it. We do not intervene in it; we are neutral. We oppose the assimilationists not because we fear assimilation, but because assimilation cannot be made into a task for the proletariat. We likewise oppose the nationalists not because we wish to prevent a national color in culture, but because we do not regard the implantation of such color as a political task. We are not against the national character of culture; we are against nationalist politics.

[Source printed pages 192-196]

National oppression, however, is an entirely different matter. It is not a question of preserving or erasing forms, but of removing force, constraint, and humiliation. National oppression smothers the cultural life of the oppressed. Obstacles placed before the mother tongue and its literature strike directly at the worker. He often knows no foreign language and reads no foreign paper. His suppressed language and literature are the only door through which he can enter cultural life, develop his consciousness, and defend himself. If that door is blocked, the machinery of oppression leaves him helpless.

National oppression also produces contempt toward the oppressed. It makes them seem, even to themselves, as though they belonged to a lower order of people. It implants in them the psychology of the slave - a terrible blow against the growth of the true class psychology of a self-conscious proletariat. And one of the worst features of national oppression is that it welds together all parts of the oppressed nation. The natural feeling of resistance brings hostile classes nearer to one another. They unite in a common hatred of the oppressor, of the alien nation, a hatred growing from the soil of oppression. Fanatical attachment to everything that is one's own becomes so dear that domestic antagonisms are forgotten. The external enemy drives out the internal enemy; national antagonisms obscure class antagonisms. The sermon of

national unity in the name of a common struggle against a common foe drowns out the call to civil war from the exploited class against the exploiting class.

Nationalist and chauvinist feelings then bloom broadly, poisoning the spiritual air and filling it with reactionary moods and instincts. The proletariat suffocates in this poisoned atmosphere. The most unfavorable conditions are created for the development of class consciousness. If we add the harmful influence which national oppression has upon the ruling nation as well, including even its proletarian layers, we get a complete picture of the injuries that national oppression inflicts upon the working class.

Since such an evil exists, it must be fought. Since oppression exists, means must be found to remove it. The national question must be taken out of the strange position in which it stands in some social-democratic circles. It makes no sense to look at it askance or to handle it reluctantly. We must remember that this is not the central question, but one among the many questions of oppression. Therefore it must occupy a place beside the others in the social-democratic program: no more, but also no less. It is harmful to inflate it; it is no less harmful to erase it.

Some social democrats say that the Russian party need not hurry to formulate a detailed declaration on the national question and can content itself with the general statement in the party manifesto recognizing the right of self-determination of all nations. But this is insufficient. To say that we are opposed to the use of violence or injustice against a nation is not yet a program. It is only a repetition of the question in other words. If in place of political guarantees one wrote: "We, the party of the proletariat, are always and unconditionally opposed to political violence," or if in place of an economic program one wrote: "We are opposed to economic oppression," nobody would regard this as a serious program. Yet when it concerns national oppression, such empty formulas are allowed to pass.

The question must be put in this form: because national oppression harms the condition of the proletariat, impedes its development, and obstructs its class struggle, every nation must - so far as this is possible under the capitalist order - be protected from oppression. Guarantees must be created that will secure for every nation the fullest freedom of cultural development and remove everything that weighs upon and cripples it. What laws and institutions are needed? What does our program demand?

We must of course understand the word guarantees in a definite and limited sense. In the capitalist order there can be no absolute guarantees against any form of oppression. The national question, like every other question of our time, is organically bound up with the foundations of capitalist economy. So long as capitalist competition remains, so long as bourgeois society generates political and spiritual tendencies that produce national conflicts, we cannot uproot those conflicts absolutely. Therefore the demands concerning the national

question belong to our minimum program: demands addressed to the bourgeois world as temporary measures to ease the existence of the proletariat and clear the road toward social revolution.

For this reason one must not present the national program as a miraculous cure capable of removing national conflict from the world. Under capitalism we can only lessen, limit, and weaken that struggle; under especially favorable conditions we can reduce its harmfulness to the smallest possible degree. But to promise to abolish it while leaving capitalist production intact would be political fraud, like the promises of social reformers who speak of social peace

without abolishing capitalism. Yet the opposite error is also dangerous: because we cannot drain the sea with a spoon, some would refuse to take even the spoon in hand. Our minimum program is minimal compared with the socialist transformation, but in relation to bourgeois society it must be maximal. We must demand all that can be wrested from it.

[Source printed pages 197-203]

The national question appears before us in two forms. The first is the question of political independence, of an independent national state. A state-nation that once existed as an independent political organism is subordinated to another, stronger state. Because it has been attached mechanically by force, it preserves its own social and political life, even if in mutilated and oppressed form, and strives to tear itself loose from its master. A struggle for independence arises; if successful, the political map gains another independent state.

The second form is different. Within the borders of one state live a number of nations that have long lost the last traces of political independence. This is a state of nationalities. Here the question is: how can different nations live peacefully together in the same state? How can it be ensured that the stronger peoples do not stifle the weaker ones? This is the national question in the full sense. Political independence could provide a complete answer only if the territory seeking independence were inhabited entirely by one nation. But such territories do not exist, and under present conditions cannot exist. Even if national independence is achieved, the newly formed state remains a state of nationalities in a smaller form. The old oppressor is replaced by a new one for other nationalities.

Nevertheless political separatism has often occupied an exaggerated place in the ranks of social democracy, while the other problem - how to organize a state of nationalities - is forgotten. The older traditions of bourgeois thought have made the first form seem the natural meaning of national liberation. Even those who consciously do not confuse the two questions often betray traces of this tradition. Thus opponents of Jewish national autonomy argue that Jews lack traditions of independent state law. But such traditions matter only when the issue is political independence. They have no relevance when the issue is what institutions are needed within a single state to administer cultural functions: whether those functions should remain in the hands of state institutions or be transferred to special national institutions.

The struggle for political independence is a struggle to redraw the political map of states. It often depends on international combinations, on circumstances of time and place, and on factors that cannot be foreseen. To make it a fixed point of program is therefore a risk. The question of the internal relations among nationalities within a state is a question of domestic politics like any other. It permits, and even demands, a clear and definite programmatic answer.

One answer often proposed is simple equality before the law: let there be no difference between Gentile and Jew, between one language and another, between nationality and race; let

everyone be equal citizens. This demand is indispensable, but it is not enough. The tasks of social democracy regarding the national question are not to create national culture or define the content of national life. They are to remove oppression and guarantee the free development of all. Since this is a negative task in relation to national content, social democracy may use various political means to achieve it. The abolition of restrictions on residence, equal civil rights, the repeal of special disabilities, and legal equality are all necessary. But they do not exhaust the matter.

Liberal thought tends to imagine society as a field of freely competing individuals, while the state stands above them and merely prevents violence. In its youth the bourgeoisie shouted to the state: step aside and make room. In old age it learned to warm itself at the fire of state power and to ask the state to protect it. The working class also appeals to state power, but in order to interfere with free competition in the name of labor protection and social rights. The distinction is important. Some rights are rights of personal freedom: the right not to be arrested arbitrarily, to speak, to assemble, to participate in legislation. Such rights can be proclaimed and their violation prohibited. Other rights require positive institutions. A constitutional right to labor protection would be empty if there were no factory inspection. A right to education is empty if schools are not organized, funded, and administered. The national question belongs largely to this second category.

The example of popular schools makes this clear. Schools are not a private matter like religion or family life, dependent upon individual initiative. The program of social democracy rightly demands free and compulsory education. But a right to schools is meaningless unless someone creates the school network, appoints teachers, chooses the language of instruction, prepares textbooks, and adapts education to the needs of the population. In a nationalities state, one central authority cannot at the same time properly satisfy the needs of Russians, Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, Georgians, Armenians, Latvians, and others. Even if it wished to be impartial, it would be incapable of doing so; in a state like Russia, where one ruling nation weighs heavily over the rest, it is still less possible.

[Source printed pages 204-211]

If the right of the smaller nations to national schools is merely proclaimed while the realization of that right is left in the hands of the ruling bourgeoisie and the general state apparatus, then mountains of gold have been promised and not a hair's worth has been given. This is the weakness of formulas that announce national equality in general but do not create organs able to realize it. Such provisions existed even in Austria, and yet Austria remained a field of bitter national struggle and of oppression in culture and education. Bourgeois politicians have often answered national conflicts with solemn declarations; the oppressed nationalities have learned how little such declarations are worth when the apparatus remains in hostile hands.

Territorial self-government also does not solve the national question. In a vast country like Russia, local self-government is necessary; local conditions differ widely. But territorial autonomy, even if useful and necessary, is not the same as national autonomy. No territory of any significance is inhabited by only one homogeneous nationality. In each province several nationalities live together and are becoming more mixed. A provincial self-government would face the same question as the central ministry: how shall the needs of different national masses be satisfied? The majority nation in the province would dominate the minority just as the ruling nation dominates the others in the central state.

For this reason the cultural functions must pass from general, supposedly all-national institutions to national institutions elected separately by each nation. The point is not to build walls between people in all spheres of life, but to remove from the field of ordinary political struggle those cultural functions that constantly produce national conflicts. If schools, language, literature, science, and art are administered by the nation concerned, the source of endless oppression and struggle is reduced. The proletariat has a direct interest in this. Otherwise the worker of an oppressed nation must constantly defend his school, his language, and his access to education against the bourgeoisie of another nation, and in that struggle he is

forced, despite himself, to march together with the bourgeoisie of his own nation. Thus national conflicts tear him away from class solidarity.

The consciousness of proletarian solidarity is not a finished thing given once and for all. It must be strengthened and developed. But the existing organization of cultural affairs places enormous obstacles in its way. From the standpoint of social democracy, which fights for political forms that under present conditions best favor the class struggle, it is necessary to remove as far as possible those forms that drive the proletarians of different nations into hostile camps.

National autonomy means this: every nation, understood as the sum of individuals belonging to a definite historical and cultural group, irrespective of the territory on which they live, elects its own organs on democratic foundations, through universal suffrage. These organs take over from the state the cultural affairs of that nation. Where cultural needs are common to the whole country or exceed the powers of one nation, they are satisfied through a federative union of national diets. Such a union can also provide the foundation upon which the proletarians of different nations unite their forces even in questions where the nations are otherwise administratively distinct.

National self-government is important for us precisely as national self-government. The collective unit that can provide the guarantee of a peaceful solution is not the territory but the nation. It consists not of the inhabitants of a given region, but of members of a given nationality wherever they live. This does not make us opponents of territorial self-government. In a country as vast as Russia, territorial self-government is necessary. But it cannot replace national autonomy.

Capitalism itself destroys the old assumption of nationally homogeneous territories. It mobilizes the population, makes it move, drives masses from one city to another, tears the bond between population and soil, and in every significant territory permanently destroys any single national color. Thus the territorial question and the national question move ever farther apart. Territorial self-government answers needs of a territorial character. The national question demands a special solution. Only national autonomy gives a precise answer to it.

This demand, together with our other demands in this field - civil equality for Jews and full rights for the Yiddish language - constitutes our program in the national question.