

## The Right of Nations to Self-Determination, according to V.I. Lenin

Erik Sandewall

In an article from January 1916 [1], Vladimir Lenin had important things to say about the right of nations to self-determination. What he wrote there would seem to be very applicable to the situation of Ukraine today. In particular, he wrote:

*Victorious socialism must achieve complete democracy and, consequently, not only bring about the complete equality of nations, but also give effect to the right of oppressed nations to self-determination, i.e., the right to free political secession.*

In his analysis of the obstacles against national self-determination, he wrote:

*Fourthly, finance capital, in its striving towards expansion, will "freely" buy and bribe the freest, most democratic and republican government and the elected officials of any country, however "independent" it may be. The domination of finance capital, as of capital in general, cannot be abolished by any kind of reforms in the realm of political democracy, and self-determination belongs wholly and exclusively to this realm.*

This seems to be just as true today as it was in 1916, now that Russia is dominated by its own 'finance capital'. He also seems to come out clearly in defense of democratic principles:

*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 favor of secession, and freedom to settle the question of secession by means of a referendum of the nation that desires to secede.*

although he also considers some objectives to take precedence over democracy:

*... mankind can achieve the abolition of classes only by passing through the tran-*

---

Notes:

---

*Liberal Kommentar is published at [www.liberalkommentar.se](http://www.liberalkommentar.se)*

*This article is located at*

*[liberalkommentar.se/artiklar/266/rights-self-determination-lenin.pdf](http://liberalkommentar.se/artiklar/266/rights-self-determination-lenin.pdf)*

*Erik Sandewall (editor) can be reached at [erik@sandewall.net](mailto:erik@sandewall.net)*

---

*sition period of the dictatorship of the oppressed class...*

Moreover, the following statement is also very relevant today:

*The fact that the struggle for national liberation against one imperialist power may, under certain circumstances, be utilized by another “Great” Power in its equally imperialist interests should have no more weight in inducing Social Democracy to renounce its recognition of the right of nations to self-determination than the numerous case of the bourgeoisie utilizing republican slogans for the purpose of political deception and financial robbery, for example, in the Latin countries, have had in inducing them to renounce republicanism.*

With respect to Russia, and towards the end of his article, he writes:

*In Russia, where no less than 57%, i.e., over 100,000,000 of the population, belong to oppressed nations, where those nations mainly inhabit the border provinces, where some of those nations are more cultured than the Great Russians, where the political system is distinguished by its particularly barbarous and medieval character, where the bourgeois-democratic revolution has not yet been completed—the recognition of the right of the nations oppressed by tsarism to free secession from Russia is absolutely obligatory for Social-Democracy in the interests of its democratic and socialist tasks.*

When it was formed in the early 1920’s, the Soviet state was organized as a federation of soviet republics, instead of the monolithic structure of Tsarist Russia. That is how Ukraine, among others, obtained the status of being one of the republics, at a time when Lenin was still in charge. This was arguably a step in the right direction for Ukraine, but the principles that Lenin had articulated some five years earlier were not applied: Ukraine’s desire for secession was defeated by military means.

It would have been very interesting to hear what Lenin might say about the situation in the Russia and Ukraine of today.

## **References**

[1] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/jan/x01.htm>