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The Scourge of Nationalism

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Patriotism assumes that our globe is divided into little spots, each one surrounded by an iron gate. Those who have had the fortune of being born on some particular spot consider themselves better, nobler, grander, more intelligent than the living beings inhabiting any other spot. It is, therefore, the duty of everyone living on that chosen spot to fight, kill and die in the attempt to impose his superiority upon all others. The inhabitants of the other spots reason in like manner...

– Emma Goldman, Patriotism

As we go to press, Croatians, Serbians and Bosnians are engaged in full-scale war. Russia is threatening action against Estonia unless it stops discriminating against ethnic Russians. Border disputes are flaring throughout the former Soviet empire as nationalists try to carve out their own, ethnically-pure nation states.

Thus, we see the “national independence” movements move from the Third World to eastern Europe. Nationalism is not, of

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course, a new phenomena. But today “civilized” warfare has advanced to the point where entire cities can be levelled in a matter of hours, and tens of thousands slaughtered in mere minutes.

War is tragic enough even when necessitated (as, for example, during the Spanish Revolution) by workers’ self-defense. But its devastation is all the more tragic resulting from the empty chimera of nationalism. There is, at root, no such thing as a nation — nationalism is an empty construct that serves both to conceal internal oppression and to define the vast majority of the world’s population as outside the realm of human solidarity.

As Jose Marti noted, “To change the master is not to be free.” Throughout the Third World, nationalism has served as the vehicle for a new set of masters to take control — but there is no evidence that the majority of the population has benefitted thereby. Nor have the nationalist revolutions in the Soviet Bloc benefitted most workers (as evidenced most recently in Lithuania where voters have ousted the nationalists and returned the former communists to power — not that there is any reason to believe their oppressive yoke will be any lighter).

The nation-state is not a natural community. Rather, nationalism is the political theology of the state — a doctrine evolved to justify all manner of outrages against external and internal threats to the state’s (or the aspiring state’s) interests. Self-determination has nothing to do with it.

Thus, Serbian nationalists relocate Croatian and Moslem populations to concentration camps (when they don’t execute them outright) in order to create ethnically homogenous territories in which to construct their new nation-state.

Indonesian generals massacre residents of East Timor who wish to set up their own nation-state, in the name of preserving the unity of the Indonesian nation (itself a colonial construct devised to simplify administration of far-flung islands).

In the name of nationalism, the U.S. and its allies felt no compunction about massacring Iraqis. In turn, Iraq’s leaders appeal to nationalism to mobilize support for their attacks against the Kurds (whose nationalist “leaders” in turn use their armed forces to suppress efforts by workers to take control of their workplaces).

The anarchist alternative to nationalism, as Sam Dolgoff notes in “Third World Nationalism and the State” (available from LLR), is a libertarian, stateless federation of various peoples with all other peoples of the world. We reject the artificial national boundaries imposed by capitalism and the state to segregate and divide the workers into hostile camps.

Our freedom, our ability to realize our capacities and pursue our desires, can only be realized when we reject nationalist efforts to paint our fellow workers in different parts of the world as “other” — as people whose aspirations and needs are less important or less legitimate than our own. It is time to move beyond international solidarity, with its implicit notion that national boundaries retain some meaning or legitimacy, towards a global solidarity of people struggling to realize our common humanity, and the freedom that we can truly enjoy only when it is extended to all.