

# The Marxists against colonialism



Wafdist riot against British rule in Egypt

## Introduction to Karl Kautsky's “Socialism and Colonial Policy”

**P**OLEMICISING FURIOUSLY against Karl Kautsky in 1916, Lenin took a footnote to praise the pamphlet we reprint here, “written by Kautsky in those infinitely distant days when he was still a Marxist”.

Karl Kautsky was “the Pope of Marxism” for two decades between Engels’ death in 1895 and World War One in 1914, when he committed socialist suicide by excusing and rationalising for the German socialist leaders’ support for their own ruling class in the war. Most of this writings were rather professorial — judicious summings-up, dispassionate investigations, historical excursions. This pamphlet was different.

Written in the heat of a political crisis within the socialist movement, it was the first comprehensive statement of a militant Marxist politics of combat against the imperialism which saw most of the world, from the late 19th century through to the mid 20th, made into possessions of a few rich states of the Northern hemisphere.

The older Kautsky and his no-longer-revolutionary Social Democratic Party had little use for the pamphlet. The early Communist International, under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, felt no need to reprint it. They condensed Kautsky’s analysis into urgent injunctions for revolutionaries in the imperial countries to champion the revolts of the colonial slaves, and those in the colonies to strive for working-class leadership in those revolts.

Almost a century on, the case stands differently. Socialists emerging from the long night of Stalinism strive to rediscover the authentic ideas of pre-Stalinist Marxism and rework them in a world that has changed greatly. We need to study the analytical basis which underpinned the terse calls to anti-imperialist action made in the heroic years of the Russian Revolution and then repeatedly adapted, bowdlerised, used and abused by Stalinists of different stripes.

Kautsky’s pamphlet was written pell-mell in the midst of a crisis. The background had been set by the German elections of January 1907.

The ruling Conservative/National Liberal bloc made imperialism the central issue. They denounced the Social Democrats, who had been criticising the German state's brutality in its South West African colony, as unpatriotic — and reduced them from 81 parliamentary seats to 43.

It was the first sharp reverse for the Social Democrats since they had started systematically contesting elections. Their whole political perspective had come to be increasingly dominated by the expectation that there would be a steady growth of Social Democratic votes. What had gone wrong? Too much radical agitation, said the right wing. It was no use fighting against necessary historical development, and imperialism was a necessary historical development. The Social-Democrats should vow allegiance to "the defence of our fatherland".

The left protested. Imperialism had attracted the middle classes, and undercut liberalism; but it would lead capitalism into convulsions, and eventually alienate the middle classes. The socialists must prepare for revolutionary upheavals by being militantly anti-imperialist. They should distance themselves from liberal illusions.

When the Socialist International met in Stuttgart, in August 1907, the German right-wingers tried to shift the international socialist movement into a more accommodating attitude towards militarism and colonialism. The full congress voted down the right-wing draft, and condemned colonialism on principle, but only by 127 votes to 108.

Alarmed, Kautsky wrote his pamphlet in the three weeks between the Stuttgart congress and the German party's congress at Essen. In the event the right wing, preferring to manipulate the management of the party behind the scenes rather than confront an aroused left wing in direct and fierce debate, let the Essen congress endorse the Stuttgart anti-colonial motion without a fight. The pamphlet was published shortly after Essen.

Kautsky distinguished between three sorts of colonies. In settler colonies, or, as Kautsky calls them, "work colonies", like the US, Canada, Argentina, Australia, etc., where European settlers became a new working class rather than exploiting the local workforce, colonialism had undoubtedly brought capitalist progress. There, socialist policy should be for an accommodation, to safeguard the rights and interests of the original local peoples. Colonisation had in fact "led everywhere to the repression, and often to the complete destruction of the natives, but that was not an unavoidable result" given the vast size and resources of the countries concerned.

The right wing proclaimed a policy of reforming the other sorts of colonies — those where the metropolis exploited local labour, with the aid of only a small band of privileged colonial settlers.

From "old-style exploitation colonies" — notably Latin America under Spanish and Portuguese rule, and India in the earlier stages of colonial rule there — the colonial powers drew profit through crude plunder. To "new-style exploitation colonies", capital was exported. That brought some economic development. But the countries were kept under colonial rule. Metropolitan armies imposed themselves, to safeguard investments and to supply the force necessary to open the way for capitalist development. Colonialism was inseparable from brutal force, the pauperisation of the peasantry, the disruption of agriculture. Thus, in India for example, "continual increase in famine and misery, in spite of heavy flow of English capital to India with a consequent improvement of the Indian productive forces in places".

Kautsky did not deny that colonial rule could promote capitalist development, or suggest that shutting underdeveloped countries off from the outside world was better than exposing them to capitalist economic influence. He insisted that the limited and painful promotion of capitalist development by imperialism was no sufficient reason for socialists to support political oppression.

"We can and must place no obstacle in the way of competition where the capitalist mode of production comes into free competition with backward modes of production. But the situation changes if we are asked to help the state power to fight for the interest of the capitalist class against the backward nations, and to subdue these for them with armed might, as happens in colonial policy. We must resist this with determination."

Expressing a refusal to glorify or romanticise pre-capitalist societies, but also reflecting his times, Kautsky used words like "backward" or "savages" for some of the colonial peoples. His usage, however, had nothing in common with that of the right-wingers who justified colonialism as the bringer of civilisation.

His bottom line was this: "If the ethic of capitalism says that it is in the interests of culture and society for lower classes and nations to be ruled, the ethic of the proletariat says that, precisely in the interests of culture and society, the oppressed and those under tutelage must throw off all dominion." That remains the bottom line for revolutionary Marxists to this day.

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