

The conflict between internationalism and nationalism in the Second International

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The historian of ideas Isaiah Berlin once stated that, viewed in hindsight, all of the social theories of the 19th century had one crucial blind spot – they had little to say on the subject of nationalism. Very early on, they had written the death certificate for a way of thinking which saw communities of common descent as a basic element of human coexistence. By 1914, however, nationalism was manifesting a vitality that exploded all social theories. This is particularly true of the internationalism of the Marxist labour movement. As a social movement for the emancipation of a particular class, it had long had a tendency to belittle the national question. This was despite the fact that it should have known better, given the experiences of the revolutionary ‘Spring of Nations’ in 1848-49 and the highly-charged issue of nationality in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The paper explores two questions which remain perturbing today and which have implications beyond the Second International: How and why, in the capitalist modernisation process, did the nationalisation of the masses triumph over the idea of emancipation? And why was the maxim of international solidarity relatively ineffective vis-à-vis the national integration of the workers and nationalist ideologies?