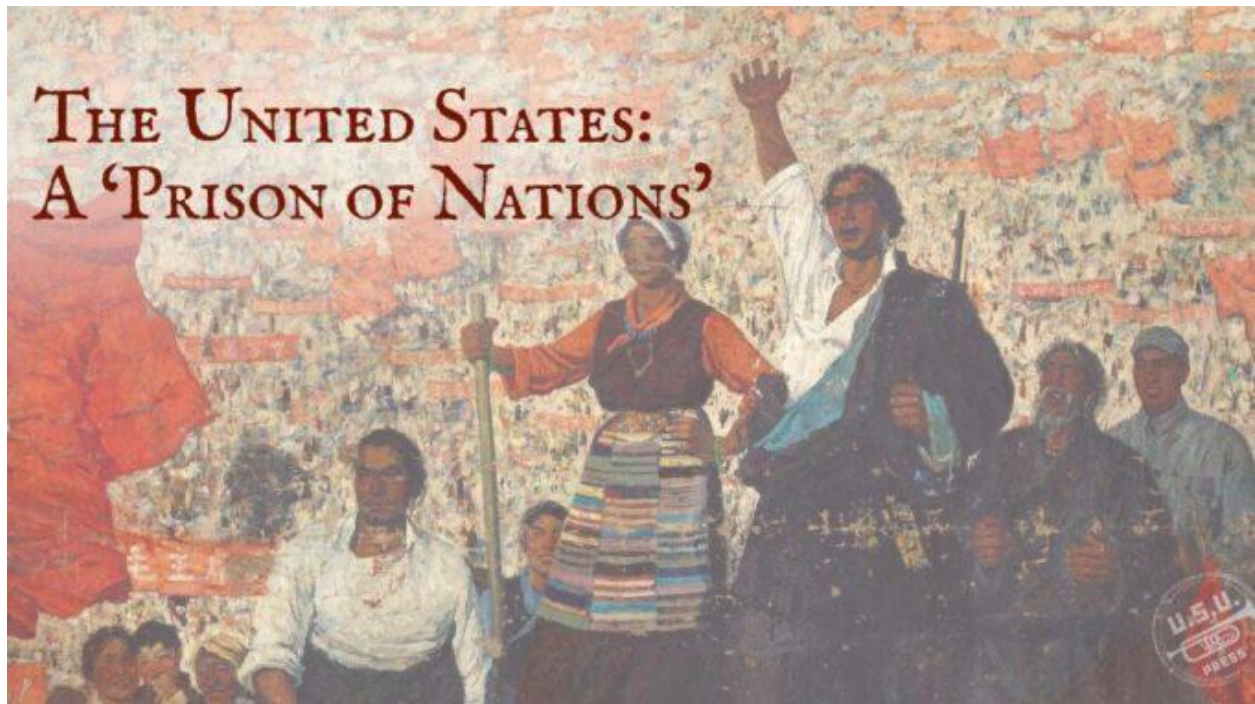


# The United States: A 'Prison of Nations'

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**Estimated reading time: 23 minutes**

*Statement from the Editors: This piece is republished from Lukas Unger's Substack with minor adjustments to the punctuation and spelling, as well as the capitalization of nationally oppressed groups to be consistent with our publication.*

**The United States of America isn't a nation-state. It never has been; it never can be.**

This may be provocative to some, but there is no denying it once the actual structure of the state is understood. This isn't a historical point of curiosity, but the bedrock on which the United States has been built and continues to stand to this day.

**If the United States isn't a nation-state, then what is it?**

Above all, the United States is a settler-colonial state, and it has remained a settler-colonial state for well over three hundred years, going back to when the territories that would go on to form its constituent parts were ruled by the British crown from across the ocean. European settlers of different nationalities crossed the Atlantic, leaving behind increasingly precarious class positions, to seize Indigenous land for themselves by force. For this purpose, the Indigenous peoples were murdered, expelled, and forced into unequal treaties that weren't worth



the paper they were written on, until gradually the settler colony turned into an independent, continent-spanning empire that reigned supreme from coast to coast.

In the meantime, the settlement of the so-called 'New World' combined with the globalization of trade brought a new horror with it: the transatlantic slave trade, resulting in the abduction, purchase and enslavement of millions upon millions of Africans to provide forced labor on the other side of the world. In the prosperous lands of the so-called American South, ripe for exploitation after the native populations had been expelled or exterminated by the settlers, slavery created the foundation for the quasi-aristocratic planter class. This relation would form the backbone of the southern plantation economy, so vital for primitive accumulation, which paved the way toward fully developed capitalism in North America, by appropriating the labor of the enslaved African masses.

All of this finds its expression through the central ideology of this American settler empire, creating justification for the crimes and consolation through the crimes' artificially constructed necessity in one: White supremacy.

So far, this should be a relatively agreeable understanding of American history, even if expressed in sharper terms than one would find in the average acknowledgement of historic (always historic, never current) brutality. All but the most reactionary Americans generally conclude that slavery and the genocide of the indigenous peoples aren't something that should be celebrated long after the fact, and even they will usually admit that racism 'played a role' in it. The issue is that the hegemonic narrative starts to become confused and downright bizarre at the latest when assessing everything following the post civil war reconstruction period—a period that is criminally misunderstood by many, which contributes to the confusion—and is given over to historical narratives that are pure expressions of liberal ideology, which insists that equality in the United States is aspirational, and slowly (but surely!) 'history' is moving in that direction. Its proponents, often across party lines since internalized white supremacy is genuinely bipartisan, might ask:

**Did we not abolish slavery?**

(Ignoring the astounding continuity between the modern American prison system and the legal reconstruction of slavery after the Civil War.)

**Did we not give the Indigenous peoples rights to their land?**

(Ignoring the forced assimilation once the process of extermination was concluded, and the continued existence of the reservation system on tiny fractions of their land.)

**Did we not give civil rights to everyone?**

(Ignoring the complete banality of formal rights in the absence of equality in all political, economic, and cultural spaces.)

**Are we not a nation of immigrants? Are we not all human? Are we not all Americans?**

This 'we'--the worst kind of we, the chauvinist's national we—is imaginary in all capitalist states, but it is especially empty in the context of the US empire. There is no American national identity with any content beyond propagandized adherence to the symbolism, slogans and personality cults of the settler state, mixed with what is essentially commodity fetishism. The exception is the one identity that outright fascists try to revitalize out in the open, and liberals try to obscure with an incoherent ideology of moral progress: Whiteness—an ever-expanding and yet brutally limited category built around the exclusion of the actual nations within the empire's borders.



Some of these nations carry names and are recognized by the US as a token gesture, and even that much was often bitterly fought for: Sioux, Cherokee, Shawnee, Navajo, and a hundred more Indigenous nations split into disparate tribal reservations by the process of genocide, displacement and subjugation.

Just as the settler state fragmented Indigenous nations, it forged new oppressed nations through slavery and annexation. Enslaved Africans, ripped from their home continent, transported across the ocean, and over generations deprived of much of their cultural heritage and even their language, formed a distinct national identity through the shared experience of enslavement, liberation and struggle against white supremacy. Similarly, although in less acute circumstances, the people subjugated by the conquest of the western territories once held by the Mexican state were subsumed into the empire, but not into whiteness, and without that, never raised to the status of settlers. When we speak of nations, we mean communities forged by shared history, territory, and struggle—not mere cultural identity. The Black nation in America, for example, like the Indigenous nations in their modern form, was created through violent subjugation and resistance against it. All of this, from the first settlements to the modern condition, exemplified by the underserved reservation and the 'inner-city' ghetto, only leaves one conclusion:

**The United States isn't a nation-state. It is a prison—a "prison of nations."**

And it isn't the first of its kind.

When the Bolsheviks prepared for revolution against the semi-feudal Tsarist state—the original "prison of nations," as Lenin referred to it—the task of national liberation was often at the forefront, and often controversial; from the question of how to deal with bourgeois nationalism to autonomy for the colonized tribal nations of Siberia. The experiences of the early Soviet Union show that dismantling empire requires combating national chauvinism with proletarian internationalism, which necessarily includes the right to national self-determination.

Consequently, the nations chained by the empire must be liberated from it—this goes for the less than United States now, as it did for the decrepit Tsarist Autocracy a hundred years ago. Let's take a closer look at the similarities and differences, and what concrete lessons there are to learn for today's liberation struggle.

## The National Question — From Empire to Union State

Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality.

This, in three words, can be understood as the official ideology of the Tsarist state in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and was in many ways its answer to surging bourgeois national movements all over Europe, including within the borders of the empire. We will focus on the "Nationality," which would be better described as national supremacy and primacy of the "Great Russians"—we simply call them Russians today, and the name already contains a hint of their supposed role in the eyes of Tsarism, as a guiding nationality for the "lesser" peoples.

Lenin describes the use of this supremacist ideology, as it was expressed by the proto-fascist Black Hundreds movement and endorsed by the Tsar:

*The conditions of life of this vast population [the oppressed nationalities] are even harsher than*



*those of the Russians. The policy of oppressing nationalities is one of dividing nations. At the same time it is a policy of systematic corruption of the people's minds. The Black Hundreds' plans are designed to foment antagonism among the different nations, to poison the minds of the ignorant and downtrodden masses [...] This dirty and despicable work is undertaken, not only by the scum of the Black Hundreds, but also by reactionary professors, scholars, journalists and members of the Duma. Millions and thousands of millions of rubles are spent on poisoning the minds of the people.*

#### **Lenin, National Equality, 1914**

So, how are these conditions resolved, and how do they relate to socialist revolution? The most obvious answer, the "common sense" of today's liberals, as it was of liberals of the last century, is the establishment of legal equality. This was obvious to everyone except the most reactionary chauvinists. Even the 1906 constitution gave token concessions to the national minorities, and finally, the February Revolution of 1917 abolished the remnants of official national discrimination, especially severe against the Muslim and Jewish minorities of the empire. The success of the Bolsheviks was not needed for this hollow "equality under the law," instead, they went far beyond. While Kerensky's government of national defense quickly became a government of national oppression, attempting to keep the prison of nations intact by all means—a cause soon taken up by the White Army, much to their detriment—the Bolsheviks, and Lenin in particular often against fierce opposition, insisted on the uncompromising right to national self-determination and secession by oppressed nations. This position was kept up during the entirety of the civil war—the only debatable exception is the Red Army's seizure of Baku to secure an oil supply for the nascent proletarian revolution, and even there, a government of Azerbaijani communists took the lead.

#### **For the Bolsheviks, the national right to self-determination was the basis of proletarian internationalism:**

*In this situation, the proletariat of Russia is faced with a twofold or, rather, a two-sided task: to combat nationalism of every kind, above all, Great-Russian nationalism; to recognize, not only fully equal rights for all nations in general, but also equality of rights as regards polity, i.e., the right of nations to self-determination, to secession [...] Complete equality of rights for all nations; the right of nations to self-determination; the unity of the workers of all nations—such is the national programme that Marxism, the experience of the whole world, and the experience of Russia, teach the workers.*

#### **Lenin, The Right of Nations to Self-Determination, 1914**

It is no coincidence that Lenin would later stress the negative influences of Great-Russian chauvinism on the early Soviet Union, and, with that, the centrality of combating it. It is no coincidence either, but rather a direct expression of this policy, that the Union Treaty of 1922, which formally established the Soviet Union, enshrined the right to secession for the constituent socialist republics, that the Soviet Union returned land seized from China and Mongolia by the Tsarist autocracy once the revolution took root there, and that where policies of russification or national suppression were implemented the offending members were expelled from the party without hesitation. This program was applied to all colonized nations, from autonomy for the tribal peoples of Siberia to demanding equal rights for those colonized by the imperialist states across the oceans.

The so-called American left should be ashamed that a party leading a revolutionary conflict in one of the most



underdeveloped regions of Europe was miles ahead of them when it came to the question of national self-determination over a hundred years ago. In fact, they often reproduce the exact chauvinism so sharply attacked by Lenin.

Of course, not all of this survived into the era of consolidation under Stalin's leadership, but that is a discussion for another time—the general principle and its importance should be clear:

The October Revolution did not lead to the foundation of a 'Great Russian Soviet Republic', and neither can an American revolution lead to the foundation of an 'National American Soviet Republic'. The right to national self-determination and secession must be upheld under all circumstances. In fact, these rights become only clearer in the American case, because of the class structure inherent to the settler state. Let's talk about that in more detail.

## Facing the Settler — Finding an 'American' Proletariat

The argument that is about to follow is the exact type of argument people in the West who imagine themselves as prospective revolutionaries don't like to hear. That makes the argument all the more important, considering most prospective Western revolutionaries never engage in revolution. I'll try to be gentle.

Unlike in Tsarist Russia, where the 'Great Russian' proletariat became one of the chief revolutionary forces for the reasons discussed in the last section, the vast majority of American settlers, even those among them who are supposedly proletarian, have always been complicit in the reproduction of empire. To be clear: This isn't a moral judgement on individuals, but rather an attempt to approach the objective class relations within the boundaries of the US state, and understand where revolutionary potential can be found and under what circumstances. Without that, making revolution is an impossibility.

To explain the particular class position of American settlers, we should talk about J. Sakai's often maligned but rarely seriously interrogated polemic 'Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat'. He didn't try to be gentle. His fundamental position is that the vast majority of white workers in the US have always constituted a privileged labor aristocracy, ultimately in alliance with the bourgeoisie when it comes to the subjugation of colonized nations. They are settlers, which, in turn, reflects on the self-conception of the American left if they falsely identify them as the primary revolutionary class.

Sakai states this position on the history and present of the American state and with that the American left, explicitly:

*The imperialists even concede that their standard 'U.S. history' is a white history, and is supposedly incomplete unless the long-suppressed Third-World histories are added to it. Why? The key to the puzzle is that Theirstory (imperialist Euro-American mis-history) is not incomplete; it isn't true at all. Theirstory also includes the standard class analysis of Amerika that is put forward into our hands by the Euro-American Left. Theirstory keeps saying, over and over: 'You folks, just think about your own history; don't bother analyzing white society, just accept what we tell you about it.'*

**J. Sakai, Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat, 1983**



What are we—those of us not interested in reproducing national chauvinism with our analysis of class relations in the US—to make of this? Well, for now, let's take Sakai's arguments seriously.

One of the most destructive tendencies of the American socialist movement has been to view the struggle of the oppressed nations against the empire as 'merely' an incidental part of the larger struggle against capitalism. This tendency will acknowledge that white supremacy is a central issue, that indigenous self-determination is vital, that reparations for slavery may be necessary, and so forth, while ultimately seeing all of it as an afterthought compared to the 'real' fight for socialism. These 'lesser' issues are relegated to the eventual destruction of the white supremacist bourgeois state, which will presumably unfold in the revolutionary process that is, for the foreseeable future, exclusively unfolding in their heads.

On what terms is this real struggle supposed to take place, then? The Bolsheviks understood the necessity of a combined struggle on all fronts, so what do these 'Euro-Amerikan', self-declared revolutionaries have to offer? They would never say it out loud because that exposes the blatant white supremacist logic beneath, but ultimately they conceive the revolutionary process as one advanced by the white majority, which should 'accommodate' or 'integrate' non-white proletarians into the larger struggle. And just in case it needs to be said: No, claiming you 'don't see color' like a caricature of the worst kind of liberal, doesn't change the ideology of this surface-level integrationist tendency, and its complete inability to conceive of a general liberation struggle against the American bourgeois state by those who are actually subjugated by it.

**In reality, and this is absolutely vital to understand, the revolutionary process is one and the same as the struggle for self-determination by the proletarian masses of the oppressed nations. They have never been truly integrated by the settler state, and face it as the most severely exploited people within the empire's borders.**

Ignoring this inevitably reproduces white supremacy, and ultimately is an expression of the settlers' concrete class interest of maintaining their comparatively privileged position as part of the global imperialist hegemon's labor aristocracy, petit bourgeois landowners, and at the very top, as the imperial bourgeoisie. This is rarely understood in those terms, but is crystal clear when viewed through the historical failures and capitulations of the American union movement and various communist organizations—as Sakai does—which were dominated by a settler majority.

At best—and it really isn't good at all—it results in treating the conflicts of the oppressed nations, and with that, the vast majority of the most acutely exploited proletarians, as secondary, as it has been done over and over again by class-collaborationist unions in the United States. Instead, the goal is to win concessions from the spoils of empire.

Sakai makes special note of this in his characterization of early trade-unionism:

*Underneath the surface appearance of militant popular reform, of workers taking on the wealthy, these movements were only attempts to more equally distribute the loot and privileges of Empire among its citizens. That's why the oppressed colonial subjects of the Empire had no place in these movements.*

**J. Sakai, Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat, 1983**

At worst, we can see the results in parties like the CPUSA, which gradually turned itself into a sad, parasitic entity attached to the Democratic Party—and with that to the settler state—by abandoning even the semblance of revolutionary action. Why? Because once the Civil Rights Act established formal legal equality, they had



exhausted their wedge issue, which initially led them 'across racial lines', and reverted to the lowest common denominator for all practically exhausted and theoretically confused communist parties: reformism thinly veiled by red flags. To this day, the CPUSA blatantly denies that anyone except the American bourgeoisie can be understood as settlers, while appropriating the language of national liberation—they, too, have made the 'prison of nations' comparison, abusing Lenin's work only to retreat to the equivalent of a 'Great Russian' chauvinist's position on the matter.

A cross difference can be seen between organizations taking on the role of de facto collaborators with the empire, and those that actually presented a threat to it by focusing on a proletarian liberation struggle, and connecting it to the larger fight against world imperialism. There is a reason why the Black Panther Party became the most advanced communist organization the US has ever seen before it was suppressed, why militants of the Black Liberation Army were killed and hunted down without mercy, why the Indigenous-led Red Power movement was torn apart with armed force and the violence of courts, and why even the generally more 'moderate' Land Back Movement and Chicano Movement are under continued surveillance and pressure by American state institutions. They present a real threat by uniting the proletarian masses of oppressed nations within the Empire's borders in the struggle against the bars of their collective prison.

**These movements prove liberation must begin where the empire's violence is most acute, not where settlers feel most comfortable.**

## The Terms of the Struggle — Shattering the Prison

Ultimately, the American left has two choices: continue as the empire's useful idiots, or finally recognize that liberation won't come from the settlers, but from those they've imprisoned in the boundaries of their state. Of course, it is no coincidence that the largest sections of the so-called left have not recognized this, since it is in their class interest as labor aristocrats to close their eyes, and the others are pulled along by their sway in organizations. Class suicide—actively working against one's own class interests, in more than words—is rarely an appealing notion, and neither is the prospect of a grueling revolutionary struggle that will, for some time at least, shatter the established value chains, reduce living standards and cause panic among those used to living off the superprofits extracted from the labor of the third world and the land of subjugated nations.

This can be no excuse. Facing reality is always preferable to idealist fantasies and lies, produced to enable a false radicalism that is ultimately destructive. Lenin was quite clear on that matter, and the role of such delusions in revolutionary situations:

*After their first serious defeat, the overthrown exploiters—who had not expected their overthrow, never believed it possible, never conceded the thought of it—throw themselves with energy grown tenfold, with furious passion and hatred grown a hundredfold, into the battle for the recovery of the 'paradise' of which they were deprived [...] In the train of the capitalist exploiters follow the wide sections of the petty bourgeoisie, with regard to whom decades of historical experience of all countries testify that they vacillate and hesitate, one day marching behind the proletariat and the next day taking fright at the difficulties of the revolution; that they become panic-stricken at the first defeat or semidefeat of the workers, grow nervous, run about aimlessly, snivel, and rush from one camp into the other.*



**Lenin, The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky, 1918**

All of this does not mean there is no role for white Americans in this struggle—quite the opposite, in fact, because they have the veil of protection granted by white supremacy others are not afforded—but without understanding their own position, they are bound to reproduce completely dysfunctional and often outright reactionary tactics. And while whiteness is generalized, there are, of course, differences in the concrete class positions of white workers in the United States, ranging from fully integrated labor aristocrats in the empire's metropolises to the historically superexploited workers of the Appalachians—the fact that this needs to be addressed is already a concession to white fragility, but I want to anticipate the inevitable outrage in the comments somehow.

At the same time, the objective existence of oppressed nations must be seen as an opportunity. The most elemental task of any revolutionary organization is to find a revolutionary class to make revolution with, not as an appendage, not as an imposition, but as one of them, leading the struggle in the clearest possible terms. This is the task of the vanguard party—not to 'include' or 'consider' the proletarian masses, but to take a leading position from within the proletarian masses.

Consequently, in the United States, the task of this revolutionary organization is not to convince oppressed nations or settlers that they must work together, on a vague and entirely ahistorical and anti-materialist basis akin to liberal denial of the most severe expressions of white supremacy, but rather that their collective liberation is one and the same task. This is what the most advanced socialist organizations like the Black Panther Party advocated for, despite distortions to the contrary that attempt to deny the colonial nature of the state:

**The dissolution of the American settler empire, the destruction of the bourgeois state, the establishment of workers' power, and the uncompromising right to self-determination, autonomy and secession for the nations imprisoned in the boundaries of the empire.**

