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Lenin in Belfast

Conference on Self-Determination of Peoples
By Florence Hervé, Belfast

Belfast, early June: This once divided city, with signs of previous conflict and division all too evident, was deliberately chosen as venue. Here, last weekend, at the invitation of the European Association of Lawyers for Democracy and Human Rights (EALDH) and the Transitional Justice Institute at the University of Ulster (Northern Ireland) lawyers and scholars from various regions, including the Basque Country, Catalonia, Kurdistan, Scotland - and Ireland itself, of course, met. The theme was: "People in Motion: self-determination and secession." Sadly the Western Sahara representative from the Sahrawi Polisario Liberation Front was denied a visa, and unable to attend. Other factors prevented the attendance of international law Professor Norman Paech from Hamburg: he had been on the the Free Gaza ships seized by Israel.

The aim of the meeting was, as EALDH-Chairman Professor Bill Bowring, put it, to allow European left-wing intellectuals to explore this fascinating topic together – with a view to contributing to discussion in Northern Ireland and within EALDH. Bowring presented a paper on "Lenin and Self-Determination," recalling in particular that in 1914 the Russian revolutionary had advocated the right of self-determination for Ireland and Poland. Socialism, Lenin suggested, must "not only entail complete equality of nations, but must also involve self-determination for oppressed nations, ie [it must] recognize the right to freedom of secession."

Professor Ephraim Nimni, a specialist in minority rights from the Queen's University Belfast, stressed that the nation-state model only rarely offers a solution to the demands of stateless nations, of which there were 3000 worldwide, living in 192 countries (2006). Less than 20 of these countries were "ethnically homogeneous" (i.e. with only up to five percent of the population belonging to cultural minorities). What was needed, Nimni suggested, was a political "paradigm shift" nationally and internationally, generating a focus on the mutual recognition of cultural minority rights, and strengthening agreements for the participation of cultural minorities in governance.

Several case-studies explored the right to self-determination: Palestine, Kurdistan, Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Northern Ireland. Urko Aiertza, a lawyer from Donostia (in Spanish: San Sebastian), drew a link with the investigation of crimes against humanity under the fascist dictator Franco Francisco (1939-1975). He drew attention to the close relationship between self-determination and human rights. For instance, as a result of the Basque-Spanish conflict (1959-2010), about 2,500 Basques were driven into exile and 7000 were detained. Torture has been used en masse, and 465 people were killed by the police, and 808 by armed groups. Currently, there are still 750

Basque prisoners.

The Australian lawyer Dr. Vicki Sentas of the campaign against the criminalization of communities (CAMPACC) (London) spoke on the impact of 'anti-terrorism' laws. In her view, after 9/11 the human right to self-determination was being increasingly undermined. In Britain alone, 20 organizations had been declared illegal. This included a ban on the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). A former professor of international relations at the University of Ankara, Haluk Gerger stated in many instances, demand for a separate state had followed long experience of oppression and repression.

On Belfast's historic Falls Road, the murals tell of battles and deaths in Ireland. One quoted the Irish Republican activist Bobby Sands, who died on hungerstrike in 1981: "Our revenge will be the laughter of our children."



Mural Picture, Falls Road, Belfast: Bobby Sands »Our revenge will be the laughter of our children«