In its Brünner programme of September 1899, the Austrian Social-Democratic Party demanded not the right of nations oppressed by Germans and Magyars to secede from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but rather the right to national-cultural autonomy (setting up self-administered, but not necessarily contiguous, national entities with their own parliaments, schools, etc.) within the framework of a multinational federal state. Otto Bauer’s essay on ‘Austria

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1. Leon Trotsky later commented that the nationality-policy of Austrian Social Democrats in fact made no distinction between oppressor and oppressed nations, with the consequence that ‘the Austrian program disclosed nothing but its own weaknesses: it saved neither the Empire of the Hapsburgs nor the Austrian Social-Democracy itself. Cultivating the idiosyncrasies of proletarian national groups, while at the same time failing really to satisfy the oppressed nationalities, the Austrian program merely camouflaged the dominance of the Germans and the Magyars’ (Trotsky 1941, p. 156). Roman Rosdolsky had the same view: ‘Although the General Austrian Social Democratic Party formally supported the transformation of the Austrian Empire into a federation of nationalities, its German-Austrian components had taken up Karl Renner’s idea of resolving the national question by constituting the empire’s nations as voluntary national cultural institutions whose activities were not confined to any particular territory. It loudly proclaimed its commitment to internationalism and the right of peoples to self-determination but in practice supported a policy that left “the decisive positions of state power in the hands of the German minority”’ (Rosdolsky 1987, p. 184, quoted in Kuhn 2007, pp. 27–8, emphasis in the original).

Otto Bauer’s credentials on the nationality-question certainly appeared to be compromised by his colonialist fantasy concerning a German Lebensraum in Russia:

Let us assume, for example, that a future socialist society sees that it can increase the productivity of labour in Germany by lowering the number of workers there and can increase the productivity of labour in southern Russia by increasing the number of workers there. It will thus seek to transfer a part of the German population to southern Russia. But Germany will not
and Imperialism’ relates the intensifying conflicts between the European great powers to the issue of minorities within Austria-Hungary itself and to the fate of the small nations on its borders, aspiring to independence while squeezed between Austria, Russia and Turkey. Anticipating a conflagration that might be set alight in the Balkans, Bauer’s essay provides insight into the fateful dilemma of Austrian Social Democrats as the enfeebled Habsburg Empire, nursing its own territorial ambitions in the Balkans, found itself increasingly embroiled in rivalries between Germany, Russia, England and France.

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‘Austria and Imperialism’

The antagonism between Great Britain and Germany has been the most influential fact during recent years for development of the foreign policy of all European states. The vigorous development of German industry was first felt in England in the commodity market. [...] It is understandable why many British industries regarded this development of German foreign trade with little goodwill. German commodities were imported duty-free into England, while Germany imposed heavy tariffs on English imports. Safely protected by a tariff-wall, the German industrialists created powerful cartels that by means of export-subsidies and dumping practices changed competitive conditions in the world market and in England itself to the disadvantage of English industry – which, being unprotected by tariffs, was deprived of those weapons. The agitation of English protectionists made German competition appear unfair in the eyes of the local population.

send its sons and daughters to the east without safeguarding their cultural independence. The German colonists will consequently enter the polity of the Ukraine not as individuals, but as a corporation under public law. If the national territorial corporations unite to form an international polity, planned colonisation will give rise to foreign-language associations of persons within the international polity, associations that in some respects will be legally bound to the territorial corporation of their nation, and in others to the polity of the foreign nation whose soil they inhabit. (Bauer 2000, p. 395.)

2. Bauer 1908.
3. [Bauer here provides statistics showing the growth of German exports, particularly to Great Britain and the British Empire.]