Rosa Luxemburg and the National Question

Is there some "right of nations to self-determination" which Socialists should support? This was a question debated by Social Democrats before the first world war, especially in Russia and Austria which were then both multi-national empires. Lenin, true to his opportunist view that any slogan was useful if it helped "mobilise the masses", answered yes. Among those who answered no was Rosa Luxemburg.

That this was so has long been known to us, but until the recent publication of a selection of her writings on The National Question (edited by Horace B. Davis, Monthly Review Press, 320pp., £9.25), we have not had the opportunity to judge the worth of the arguments she used. That her writings on this question—as opposed to those on economics and other matters—should have remained unavailable for so long is no accident. Left-wing publishers have just not been interested in publishing a criticism of what has become a dogma in left-wing circles: that Socialists are duty-bound to support struggles for "national liberation".

Rosa Luxemburg was born in 1871 in Zanosc (though she was brought up in Warsaw) which, on today's maps, is a town in eastern Poland near the Russian border. But in 1871 it was part of the Russian empire since Poland had not existed as an independent State since 1795. Over the period 1772 to 1795 in fact Poland had been partitioned amongst Russia, Austria and Prussia. About two-fifths of pre-1772 Poland went to Russia and about one-fifth each to Prussia and Austria.

When the Social Democratic movement grew in Germany and Austria towards the end of the 19th century it also spread to the Polish-speaking areas of these countries. At first Polish-speaking Social Democrats joined the German and Austrian parties, but in 1892 separate Polish parties were formed in both countries. Later that year these amalgamated to form, with representatives from Russian Poland, the Polish Socialist Party (PPS). The PPS made its principal demand the reconstitution of an independent Poland within the pre-1772 boundaries. The following year a number of young Polish exiles in Zurich, including Rosa Luxemburg, split off precisely on this point and set up the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland (SDKP).

The choice of this odd-sounding title was deliberate, for the "Kingdom of Poland" was the official name of Russian Poland. The party's name therefore proclaimed that it was a party operating only in Russia. And in fact when the Russian Social Democratic Party got off the ground the SDKP (or more precisely, after the adhesion of a Lithuanian group in 1899, the SDKPL) was its section in Poland and Lithuania.

The issue of whether or not Polish independence should be supported came up at the 1896 London Congress of the Second International to which the PPS had submitted a resolution which declared "that the independence of Poland represents an imperative political demand both for the Polish proletariat and for the international labour movement as a whole". Rosa Luxemburg was resolutely opposed to this and wrote a series of articles in the international Social Democratic press arguing that workers should organise irrespective of nationality within the frontiers of the capitalist State in which they found themselves and should not seek to re-draw these frontiers, the struggle to achieve which would merely divert workers from the class struggle and Socialism. The PPS motion was not in fact voted on but was replaced by a vague general resolution which nevertheless still referred to "the complete right of all nations to self-determination".

In opposing an independent Poland Luxemburg was going against a demand supported by Marx throughout his political life. She was well aware of this and did not hesitate to describe Marx's views on the Polish Question as "obsolete and mistaken". Since this is a position the Socialist Party of Great Britain has also taken up it will be interesting to examine Luxemburg's arguments on this point.
In 1848, she pointed out, western European democrats, amongst whom Marx must be included, wanted an independent Poland established to act as a buffer between Tsarist Russia and West Europe so as to remove the threat of Tsarist intervention to halt the extension of political democracy there. This, she said, was a tenable position in 1848 but not in the 1890's and 1900's (nor even in 1880 when Marx made a further declaration in favour of Polish independence). For in the meantime, thanks to the introduction of capitalism and with it of an urban industrial proletariat, Russia was no longer the monolithic force for reaction it had been. As capitalism and the working class developed in Russia so did-and had-developed the possibility of overthrowing Tsarism and establishing a political democracy there too. Turning to Poland, she argued that the introduction of capitalism had tied Russian Poland so close to Russia (Polish industry served the Russian market) that the proposal to re-establish an independent Poland was anyway a "utopian fantasy".

Luxemburg went on to point out that the demand for an independent Poland was a demand for the establishment of another capitalist-and inevitably expansionist and oppressive-State. This, she said, was not the task of the workers; what concerned them at that time was winning various elementary democratic freedoms. She thus urged Polish-speaking workers in Russian Poland to struggle, together with the workers of all the other nationalities to be found within the borders of the Russian empire, to overthow Tsarism and establish political democracy in Russia. (Polish-speaking workers in Germany and the Austrian empire should likewise be struggling with their fellow workers there to establish political democracy). Luxemburg regarded an end to discrimination on national or language grounds-with full provision for the use of minority languages in all aspects of social and political life-as an integral part of the political democracy she was urging to be established under capitalism as a means of facilitating the struggle for Socialism. In fact she went further and argued in some detail, in a series of articles published in 1908–9, that Poland should be given autonomy within any all-Russia democratic republic. Thus the SDKPL countered the PPS demand for the restoration of an independent Poland with a demand for home rule for Russian Poland within a democratic Russia.

We would not deny that in the absolutist political conditions of Tsarist Russia the working class was obliged to struggle for political freedoms such as the vote, freedom of the press and the freedom to form trade unions and parties, but this should-and could-have been done in conjunction with a clear-cut and uncompromising struggle for world socialism. Luxemburg of course knew what Socialism was and did carry out propaganda for it, but as a Social Democrat was committed to the mistaken theory that a socialist party should have a "minimum" programme of political and social reforms to be achieved within capitalism as well as the "maximum" programme of socialism.

Nevertheless it can be said in favour of Luxemburg's formulation-that the workers of Russian Poland should struggle with the other workers in Russia for an all-Russia democratic republic-that it made no concession to nationalism; it appealed to them as workers not as Poles. She knew that a campaign to establish an independent Poland would unleash nationalist passions which would divert the working class in Russian Poland not just from the struggle to establish Socialism but even from the struggle to win elementary democratic freedoms. She was proved right on this point: when Poland got independence in 1919 an authoritarian nationalist dictatorship under former PPS-leader Pilsudski soon came to power.

But events proved her wrong for believing Polish independence to have been a "utopian fantasy". If she had confined herself to saying that an independent Polish State would continue to be dominated by Russia or some other big power she would have been right, but she was suggesting that even formal political independence for Poland was impossible. The fact that Poland got such independence in 1919 makes her arguments on this point quaint reading today, but it still remains true that Poland has never really been independent of one or other imperialist power. Twenty years after being "restored" Poland was again partitioned between Germany and Russia and since the war has been a mere Russian satellite. Indeed parts of pre-1772 Poland are now back in Russia again. Luxemburg's mistake here should be a warning to Socialists not to be dogmatic on issues such as this: capitalism can be very flexible in its political institutions.

The issue of the "right of nations to self-determination" came up again in 1903 when the Russian Social Democrats officially incorporated this demand into their programme. Once again Luxemburg opposed this not only as politically wrong but as theoretically unsound. Her arguments on this last point are the same as ours:
"A "right of nations" which is valid for all countries and all times is nothing more than a metaphysical cliché of the type of "rights of man" and "rights of the citizen".

When we speak of the "right of nations to self-determination", we are using the concept of the "nation", as a homogeneous social and political entity... In a class society, "the nation" as a homogeneous socio-political entity does not exist. Rather, there exist within each nation, classes with antagonistic interests and "rights".

Included in an appendix to Davis' selection of her writings on this question is a statement published in 1916 by some members of the SDKPL in an obscure Polish-language journal in exile. This shows a remarkable degree of understanding on this issue, especially the following:

"The so-called right of self-determination is also used with the proviso that it will become a reality for the first time under socialism and is thus an expression of our striving for socialism. This proposition is open to the following objections. We know that socialism will do away with all national oppression, because it removes the class interests that furnish the driving force of such oppression. We also have no reason to assume that the nation, in socialist society, will form a politico-economic unit. By all indications it will have the character of a cultural and linguistic unit; for the territorial division of the socialist cultural unit, insofar as this will survive at all, can only follow the needs of production, and this division would have to be determined, not by individual nations separately, from their own power (as the "right of self-determination" demands), but through the joint action of all interested citizens. The carrying over of the formula of "right of self-determination" into socialism arises from a complete misunderstanding of the nature of socialist society."

We could hardly express it better ourselves. Unfortunately most of those who expressed such views were later diverted by Bolshevism and the Russian revolution and soon disappeared from the scene of history.

Although Luxemburg knew what Socialism was and had an honourable record of opposing the First World War as well as both reformism within Social Democracy and the undemocratic practices of the Bolsheviks, she too made her mistakes. But on the question of nationalism, with her criticism of Marx's position as "obsolete and mistaken" she made an important contribution to socialist theory. The publication in English of her views on this issue will hopefully help towards debunking the slogan of "the right of nations to self-determination".

Saturday, 1 April 1978