

THE LENIN-LUXEMBURG CONTROVERSY

Max Beer, the well-known Socialist historian, gives us here the first of two articles describing the discussions which took place between Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg before the war. The issues of the discussion have now become of wide international interest. Hitherto, however, scarcely anything has been known of the discussion in this country at all. The writing of this article has required special research into files of German Socialist papers, and the result is the publication of material which is completely new to our movement, and which, incidentally, has no little topical interest.

THESE lines are not dictated by the desire to make converts either for Lenin or Luxemburg, nor to induce the converted to give preference to the views of one over the other, but to assist the student in his endeavour intelligently to follow the discussion which is still going on between the respective adherents of those two outstanding figures of Marxist thought and revolutionary action.

1. Lenin and Luxemburg were both gifted by nature with intellectual and moral energies far above the average. Lenin's mind, as it appears from his writings and activities, was much more powerful, but not so nimble and many-sided as that of Luxemburg. He was absolutely single-minded: his thinking and doing were exclusively bent on the furtherance and realisation of the social revolution in Russia, on the conquest of power by the working class in alliance with the peasantry, as the lever of the universal revolution of the working classes and oppressed nationalities. One cannot imagine Lenin putting away, for months and months, his economic studies, revolutionary propaganda and organising activities for the study of botany, astronomy, or painting, as Luxemburg could do, and actually did. Lenin knew Russia from top to bottom, and other countries quite well. Luxemburg knew all countries quite well, but none was her own domain of revolution. Lenin visualised the social revolution in Russia as something very near and concrete and which was to be prepared for by concrete means, just as a clear-thinking Foreign Office and War Office visualise a war and prepare for it. Luxemburg thought of social revolution in general; she regarded it as an inevitable terminating phase of capitalist development which was to be investigated and for which the working class had to be educated, so as to enable it to take advantage of that supreme moment, whenever it might arrive. Lenin was the statesman and the organiser of the Russian

social revolution, and the inspirer of the universal revolution; Luxemburg a keen student and ardent propagandist of the revolutionary Labour Movement in general.

2. The first clash between Lenin and Luxemburg occurred in 1903-4; it was the time when the Social Democratic Movement in Russia, emerging from the stage of loose organisation, of small autonomous circles and conspiratory societies, was on the point of forming a political Party. The question uppermost in the mind of the leaders was the drafting of Rules which were to embody the new organising idea and policy (tactics) of the Party. Two currents of thought were struggling for supremacy:

(a) The Menshevik one, which was, on the whole, in conformity with the more advanced wing of Central and Western European Social Democracy, i.e., organisation of the labouring masses, their education to an understanding of Socialism, conquest of power by the working class, establishment of a social and democratic Commonwealth. All workers carrying on the economic class war (forming trade unions and, in case of necessity, downing tools) and all persons who adopt Socialist views and support the Party were to be regarded as members.

(b) The other current was the Bolshevik one, represented mainly by Lenin, who looked upon the Social Democratic Party as an organisation of the most capable and most devoted, in short, the *élite* of the Socialist and Labour Movement, and its Central Committee or Executive as the General Staff, determining the strategy and tactics of the whole revolutionary working class. Not any working man who was a trade unionist and in the interest of his organisation struck work, nor any person who sympathised with, or gave material and literary support to the Socialist Movement, was *ipso facto* a member of the Party. With Lenin, membership of the Party was conditioned by personal activity in the cause, by personal endeavour and qualification to win the confidence of workers and the leadership of their various organisations. A Socialist Party was not mainly a society for debating social problems nor a machinery to procure parliamentary seats for its members, but an organisation for the purpose of winning the working class and leading it into the battle for its economic emancipation. The real arena of the members of the Social Democratic Party was formed by field, mine, factory, and proletarian organisations.

The opposition to Lenin came from two sides: from the old representatives of the autonomous conspiratory circles and secret societies, who in the name of liberty protested against the centralising aspirations of the Bolshevik leader; then from the Social Democrats, who saw in Lenin's idea of Party a sort of revival of the Jacobin-Blanquist type of organisation, a small, but highly efficient

society, but separated from the masses and trying to dominate them by means of usurped dictatorial power.

Luxemburg belonged to the latter category of critics of Lenin, and wrote two articles in the Russian *Iskra*, which were translated into German and published in the *Neue Zeit*, 1904 (vol. 2, p. 488 sqq., p. 521 sqq.). She told him that the Social Democratic Party was nothing else but the political organisation of the working class and that the policy of the Party could not be determined by the Central Committee, but arose out of the spontaneous activities of the proletariat, fighting for its vital interests. She wrote literally: "Also with regard to the fighting policy, the unconscious precedes the conscious; the logic of the objective process of history comes before the subjective logic. The rôle of the Social Democratic leadership is essentially of a conservative character," it guarded the terrain won by the working class and worked it out in all its consequences and turned it into a bulwark from which further progress would be made possible. Important for social democracy was not the intuitive and anticipatory construction of the future policy, but the proper appreciation of the fighting policy prevailing at a given point of the development of the Labour Movement. Luxemburg looked upon the class struggle between Capital and Labour as a historic process, the laws of which were translated by the Social Democrats into theoretical and tactical views; the best guarantee for their correct translation was the unfettered development of the Labour Movement and the Social Democratic Party; but, since those theoretical and tactical views were manifestations of, and adjustments to the given phase of economic development, opportunist mistakes were inevitable, but would be corrected by Social Democracy never losing sight of the ultimate aims of the Labour Movement. Lenin's over-centralisation desired to guard the movement against all opportunism, but at the same time it stifled the creative power of the movement, and deprived it of its elasticity, of which the Party stood in great need, for the approaching Revolution in Russia would be a *bourgeois* revolution, during which the Labour Movement would be exposed to the danger of being enmeshed in middle class thought and switched off its Socialist road.

In the years from 1905 onwards, i.e., between the first and second Russian Revolution (1905-1917), Luxemburg approached more and more the position of Lenin, but never identified herself with Lenin. Her most advanced position found expression in the manifesto, written by her as leader of the Spartakus-Bund (1918) a month before she suffered martyrdom.

3. The second point at issue between Luxemburg and Lenin was *Nationality*. Luxemburg was strongly of opinion that in the Imperialist period of history there was no room for nationalist

struggles ; she regarded all nationalist struggles as an anachronism ; she believed all the talk about self-determination of the nations was rather retrogressive, and that it was particularly dangerous for the proletarian revolution to get involved in nationalist conflicts.

Lenin opposed her, being convinced that the struggle for national emancipation, particularly in Asia, would play an important rôle in the universal social revolution. Reviewing a pamphlet written by Luxemburg in 1916 and published in 1916 under the pseudonym of "Junius" (*Krise der Sozialdemokratie*), Lenin declared : "Nationalist wars against Imperialism are not only possible and probable, but inevitable, and must be regarded as progressive and revolutionary. For instance, a national war of liberation by Persia, India, and China is quite probable, and will be of great assistance to a proletarian revolution in any of the great countries of Europe. Under a Socialist régime the right of nationalities to self-determination must be recognised." (Written by Lenin in the autumn, 1916).