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**Tracing The Debate Between
Rosa Luxemburg And Lenin
About The National Question**

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TRACING THE DEBATE BETWEEN ROSA LUXEMBURG AND LENIN ABOUT THE NATIONAL QUESTION

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Foreword

This is the tenth book published under the auspices of the Center for Asian Studies (*Laboratório de Estudos da Ásia* - LEA) of the University of São Paulo, the seventh one in English for an international audience.

This series is dedicated to publishing original and cutting-edge research work related to Asian and Eurasian themes conducted at the University of São Paulo.

We hope you enjoy the reading.

From the authors

This work represents the publication in book format of research materials used for my master's thesis at the University of São Paulo about the debate between Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin on the national question. Since the participation of Professor Angelo Segrillo, my thesis supervisor — with his constant reading suggestions, moral encouragement, error corrections, etc. — was essential for the successful conclusion of the undertaking, I invited him to be a co-author of this book. I was very happy that he accepted and I hope that this intellectual partnership will continue in the future. In the meantime, I hope that the present work can be useful to our readers.

Amanda Candeias

I was surprised and happy when I received Amanda's invitation to co-author this book, which results from the master's thesis I supervised. Amanda and I indeed developed a very close partnership and we have grown intellectually throughout this journey. I already had profound knowledge of Lenin's works and, stimulated by Amanda, delved into Rosa Luxemburg's books and articles to nurture this comparative research. I believe that the final result was quite significant. Although there are a good number of books and articles that compare/contrast Luxemburg and Lenin in general intellectual terms and also mention the national question, to my knowledge, this is the first book dedicated *exclusively* to the debate between Luxemburg and Lenin on the national question. I hope it can be useful to laypersons and specialists who are interested in the topic.

Angelo Segrillo

*Tracing The Debate Between Rosa Luxemburg And Lenin
About The National Question*

A number of books and articles have comparatively analyzed Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's and Rosa Luxemburg's works and included comments on their discussions about nationalism.¹ However, there is still no major work dedicated *exclusively* to this debate between the two. It is what we intend to start here. We will analyze in detail the writings in which the two discussed directly with each other the theme of nationalism and indicate the main points of divergence and convergence in this theoretical/political dialogue.

Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg started off from a common Marxist foundation and thus shared many of the assumptions of this school of thought on the national question. In terms of contemporary studies of nationalism, both would be classified as modernist and instrumentalist.² They believed that nationalism was a modern phenomenon, originally linked to nascent capitalism and that it would undergo radical transformation in the declining phase of imperialist capitalism. They also agreed that a class approach should guide (and have priority over) considerations of the national question in the political struggle for socialism. In spite of this initial common theoretical basis, they differed substantially over the national question, in particular over the specific ways of applying national policies to the large geographic space ("homeland") that they had in common — after all, both Lenin's Russia and Luxemburg's birthplace in Poland were part of the Russian Empire.

At this point, one should pay attention to a technical detail: the differentiation between the use of *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis* for determining the nationality of citizens in different

¹ See, for example, Shachtman, 1935; Wolfe, 1961; Lowy, 1976; Davis, 1978; Mattick, 2007; Hudis, 2018; Baier, 2019.

² Cf. Conversi, 2007.

countries. In most Western countries, a person's nationality is determined by the legal principle of *jus soli* ("right of soil"). For example, if a child of immigrants is born in Brazil, he/she is considered Brazilian immediately. In Russia and Slavic countries in general, a person's nationality has nothing to do with the place of birth and is determined by the principle of *jus sanguinis* ("right of blood"). That is, a person's nationality is determined according to the nationality of the father or mother. This principle tends to perpetuate ethnic differences and generates the so-called multinational states. In present-day Russia, in the USSR and in the Russian Empire, more than 100 nationalities coexisted (sometimes with underlying tensions between them). In other words, *jus sanguinis* generates conditions whose heterogeneity, complexity and tensions are more complicated than in the more homogeneous national states based on *jus soli*.

The above mentioned is important in order to understand why the debates between Luxemburg and Lenin on policies regarding nationalism in the Russian Empire were so fierce. The specificities of complex multinational conditions help explain part of the intricacy of the discussions between Rosa and Vladimir, even in points where they mostly agreed — such as, local autonomy as a corrective to the excesses of the necessary state centralization or the issue of federalism.

Taking into account these preliminary nuances, we can now proceed to the description of the articles in which Luxemburg and Lenin debated directly between themselves on the national question. Both have written about nationalism in general in many of their writings, but those in which they debated directly with each other on this specific topic can be grouped according to the following chronological scheme.

1) The beginning of their interactions was motivated by Lenin in 1902-1903. In preparation for the 2nd Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (R.S.D.L.P.) in 1903, he

wrote several articles to defend the paragraph of the draft program of the party that dealt with the national question — it would be the future point 9 of the program adopted in the 2nd Congress, which stated the right of nations to self-determination. The most important of these articles was “The National Question in Our Program,” but Lenin also addressed the issue in other writings, such as “On the Manifesto of the League of the Armenian Social-Democrats” and “The Position of the Bund in the Party.”

2) Luxemburg criticized this stance by Lenin and the Bolsheviks on several occasions, but she did so in a more systematic and theoretically in-depth way in the series of articles she wrote in 1908-1909 on the national question and autonomy for *Przegląd Socjaldemokratyczny* (“Social Democratic Review”). The most important article in the series was “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination.”

3) Lenin replied to Luxemburg’s criticism in a series of articles he wrote in 1913-1914, among which the main ones were “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination” and “Critical Remarks on the National Question.”

4) During the war, Luxemburg wrote, in prison, in April 1915, a pamphlet (“The Crisis of Social Democracy”) under the pseudonym “Junius.” Published in Zurich on January 2, 1916, the brochure contained observations on the national question and self-determination of nations. Without knowing that Rosa Luxemburg was the author, Lenin — critical of the author’s positions on the national question — responded with an article entitled “The Junius Pamphlet.” Besides — at about the same time and under the same impulse — he criticized the position of Rosa Luxemburg’s supporters in her Polish party and at the Zimmerwald conference who opposed self-determination or independence for Poland. He did this especially in the article “The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up.”

5) In 1918, Rosa Luxemburg wrote a chapter in her (posthumously published) book “The Russian Revolution”

criticizing the Bolsheviks' policy on nationalities after they seized power.

6) With the assassination of Luxemburg in 1919, Lenin terminated his discussion with Luxemburg on the national question. In one of his last pronouncements on Luxemburg (a kind of eulogy), he let slip a critical remark about Luxemburg's position on the national question.

We shall now examine each of the above steps of the direct exchange between Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin specifically on the national question.

The kick-off of the debate: Lenin's articles in 1902-1903 defending the paragraph about self-determination of nations in the party's program

In 1903, the 2nd Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party was to take place and adopt a new program for the R.S.D.L.P. Lenin, along with the rest of the Iskra newspaper editors, had proposed a draft program which contained a specific point defending the "right of self-determination for all nations included within the bounds of the state." This point had given rise to criticism from the left and the right in the social democratic movement of the region. The Polish Socialist Party (P.S.P., the "right wing" of the socialist movement which defended Poland's independence from the Russian Empire) accused the formulation of being too vague and therefore useless. Meanwhile, Rosa Luxemburg's more "leftist" supporters in the SDKPiL ("Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania") said it left an open flank for nationalist tendencies and the infiltration of bourgeois nationalist ideology in the workers' movement.

In an article entitled "The National Question in Our Programme," (Iskra, 15 July 1903) Lenin defended the need for an explicit point about "self-determination of nations" in the

party's program.

In our draft Party programme we have advanced the demand for a republic with a democratic constitution that would guarantee, among other things, "recognition of the right to self-determination for all nations forming part of the state". Many did not find this demand in our programme sufficiently clear [...] The Social-Democrats will always combat every attempt to influence national self-determination from without by violence or by any injustice. However, our unreserved recognition of the struggle for freedom of self-determination does not in any way commit us to supporting every demand for national self-determination. As the party of the proletariat, the Social-Democratic Party considers it to be its positive and principal task to further the self-determination of the proletariat in each nationality rather than that of peoples or nations. We must always and unreservedly work for the very closest unity of the proletariat of all nationalities, and it is only in isolated and exceptional cases that we can advance and actively support demands conducive to the establishment of a new class state or to the substitution of a looser federal unity, etc., for the complete political unity of a state. This explanation of our programme on the national question has evoked a strong protest from the Polish Socialist Party (P.S.P.) [... The] P.S.P. expresses indignation at this "amazing" explanation and at the "vagueness" of this "mysterious" self-determination of

ours; it accuses us both of doctrinairism and of holding the “anarchist” view that “the worker is concerned with nothing but the complete abolition of capitalism, since, we learn, language, nationality, culture, and the like are mere bourgeois inventions” [...] What makes our explanation so “amazing”? [...] Does recognition of the *right* of nations to self-determination really imply *support* of any demand of every nation for self-determination? After all, the fact that we recognise the *right* of all citizens to form free associations does not at all commit us, Social-Democrats, to *supporting* the formation of any new association; nor does it prevent us from opposing and campaigning against the formation of a given association as an inexpedient and unwise step. We even recognise the right of the Jesuits to carry on agitation freely, but we fight (not by police methods, of course) against an alliance between the Jesuits and the proletarians.³

With these arguments, Lenin hoped to clearly demarcate his position. In his opinion, he is not moving away from the priority to the class factor in favor of openings to the national factor when he argues that being in favor of the right of nations to self-determination (free choice by the majority of the population) as a principle does not mean that the social democratic party should actively support any demand for independence or self-determination of a nation by a portion of the population: whether or not the party will support any specific demand for self-determination will depend on the class

³ Lenin, 1960-1970c, pp. 452-453.

interests of the proletariat.

Rosa Luxemburg's response in the series of articles on the national question and autonomy in 1908-1909

Rosa Luxemburg criticized the position adopted by Lenin and the then editorial board of the Iskra newspaper — embodied later in point 9 of the program officially adopted by the R.S.D.L.P. at its 2nd Congress in 1903 — in the article “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” which was part of the series of articles on The National Question and Autonomy that she wrote in seven issues (6-10, 12 and 14-15) of *Przegląd socialdemokratyczny* (“Social Democratic Review”, a theoretical organ of the SDKPiL in Krakow). Luxemburg did not directly cite the Bolshevik leader by name, but rather criticized points of the official R.S.D.L.P. program and their result in practice.⁴

Among other problems, the 1905 Revolution in Russia has brought into focus the nationality question. Until now, this problem has been urgent only in Austria-Hungary. At present, however, it has become crucial also in Russia, because the revolutionary development made all classes and all political parties acutely aware of the need to solve the nationality question as a matter of practical politics [...] In the program of the Social Democratic Labor Party of Russia [R.S.D.L.P.], such a formula [...] is provided by the ninth point; this says that the

⁴ The complete official program adopted by the R.S.D.L.P. in 1903 can be seen in *Programme...* [1903].

party demands a democratic republic whose constitution would ensure, among other things, “that all nationalities forming the state have the right to self-determination.” This program includes two more extremely important propositions on the same matter. These are the seventh point, which demands the abolition of classes and the full legal equality of all citizens without distinction of sex, religion, race or nationality, and the eighth point, which says that the several ethnic groups of the state should have the right to schools conducted in their respective national languages at state expense, and the right to use their languages at assemblies and on an equal level with the state language in all state and public functions. Closely connected to the nationality question is the third point of the program, which formulates the demand for wide self-government on the local and provincial level in areas which are characterized by special living conditions and by the special composition of their populations. Obviously, however, the authors of the program felt that the equality of all citizens before the law, linguistic rights, and local self-government were not enough to solve the nationality problem, since they found it necessary to add a special paragraph granting each nationality the “right to self-determination.” What is especially striking about this formula is the fact that it doesn’t represent anything specifically connected with socialism nor with the politics of the working class. “The right of nations to self-determination” is at first glance

a paraphrase of the old slogan of bourgeois nationalism put forth in all countries at all times: “the right of nations to freedom and independence.”⁵

Rosa Luxemburg criticized the vague (and even dangerously ambiguous and unrelated to the class issue) character of such a formulation, saying that it might even bring more confusion about the problem rather than solve it.

The formula, “the right of nations to self-determination,” [...] gives no practical guidelines for the day to day politics of the proletariat, nor any practical solution of nationality problems. For example, this formula does not indicate to the Russian proletariat in what way it should demand a solution of the Polish national problem, the Finnish question, the Caucasian question, the Jewish, etc. It offers instead only an unlimited authorization to all interested “nations” to settle their national problems in any way they like. The only practical conclusion for the day to day politics of the working class which can be drawn from the above formula is the guideline that it is the duty of that class to struggle against all manifestations of national oppression [...] However, the duty of the class party of the proletariat to protest and resist national oppression arises not from any special “right of nations,” just as, for example, its striving for the social and political equality of

⁵ Luxemburg, 1908-1909a, pt. 1, paras. 1-4.

sexes does not at all result from any special “rights of women” which the movement of bourgeois emancipationists refers to. This duty arises solely from the general opposition to the class regime and to every form of social inequality and social domination, in a word, from the basic position of socialism [... The] formula, “the right of nations to self-determination,” is essentially not a political and problematic guideline in the nationality question, but only a means of avoiding that question [...]. The general and cliché-like character of the ninth point in the program of the Social Democratic Labor Party of Russia shows that this way of solving the question is foreign to the position of Marxian socialism. 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.” Dialectic materialism, which is the basis of scientific socialism, has broken once and for all with this type of “eternal” formula. For the historical dialectic has shown that there are no “eternal” truths [... The] position of socialists with respect to nationality problems depends primarily on the concrete circumstances of each case, which differ significantly among countries, and also change in the course of time in each country.⁶

Luxemburg gave several examples of how the thinking of the most consistent Marxist authors on the national question is

⁶ Luxemburg, 1908-1909a, pt. 1, para. 28 and pt. 2, paras. 1. and 7.

not rigid and fixed but rather dialectical.

She pointed out the case of Turkey, saying that Marx himself, at the time of the Crimean war (1853-1855), had written that Turkey served as a citadel against reactionary Russia and, therefore, the struggles of the southern Slavic peoples who were under the control of Turkey and rebelled against it were counter-revolutionary. This was the position of social democracy for some time, but then, with changing circumstances, the position of social democracy on Turkey changed. Social democracy supported Turkey's difficult internal modernization efforts, but came to consider that if the southern Slavic peoples were to break free from Turkey, they would be more likely to move on to modern capitalist development than if they were still tied to semi-feudal Turkey. Luxemburg gave this example to show that the most consequent social democratic thinkers were not stuck in eternal, immutable schemes but rather changed their position according to the changing reality, even when it meant adopting a position different from that which Marx himself took in a determined and specific historical moment.⁷

One of the aspects invoked by Luxemburg is that social democracy should not be guided by the sentimental principle of some would-be eternal and immutable birthright, but rather follow the progressive tendencies of historical development. And it was clear to her that historical development under capitalism was moving in the direction of centralization and large states. Thus, small nationalities had little chance of surviving or strengthening as independent nation states.

[... This] contradiction, with respect to the consolidating growth of international civilization, lies in another area than where Kautsky seeks it, not in the tendency toward the idea of a "national state," but rather where

⁷ Luxemburg, 1908-1909a, pt. 2, para. 8.

Marx indicates it to be [...], in the tendency to create [...] great capitalist states. The development of world powers, a characteristic feature of our times growing in importance along with the progress of capitalism, from the very outset condemns all small nations to political impotence. Apart from a few of the most powerful nations, the leaders in capitalist development, which possess the spiritual and material resources necessary to maintain their political and economic independence, “self-determination,” the independent existence of smaller and petty nations, is an illusion [...]. From this point of view, the idea of insuring all “nations” the possibility of self-determination is equivalent to reverting from Great-Capitalist development to the small medieval states, far earlier than the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁸

And she said that this old tendency of capitalism towards centralization and growth of states, with all the consequences noted for small nationalities and countries, became stronger in the era of imperialism. Imperialism further weakened the thesis of “self-determination of nations” as a birthright or trend.

The other principal feature of modern development, which stamps such an idea [as self-determination] as utopian, is capitalist imperialism [...]. The fruit of that trend is the continuous destruction of the independence of more and more new countries and peoples, of entire continents [...]. The hope of realizing

⁸ Luxemburg, 1908-1909a, pt. 3, para. 21.

this “right” [of self-determination] on the basis of the existing setup is a utopia; it is in direct contradiction to the tendency of capitalist development on which Social Democracy has based its existence. A general attempt to divide all existing states into national units and to re-tailor them on the model of national states and statelets is a completely hopeless, and historically speaking, reactionary undertaking.⁹

Luxemburg ends the article “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination” with her battle cry in relation to the national question, which is that it cannot be seen outside of a class perspective.

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.” [...] Thus,] who is that “nation” and who has the authority and the “right” to speak for the “nation” and express its will? How can we find out what the “nation” actually wants? [...] The nation wants what the majority of the people want. But woe to the Social Democratic Party which would ever take that principle as its own yardstick [...] Social Democracy by its very nature is a party representing the interests of a huge majority of

⁹ Luxemburg, 1908-1909a, pt. 3, paras. 22 and 28.

the nation. But it is also for the time being in bourgeois society, insofar as it is a matter of expressing the conscious will of the nation, the party of a minority which only seeks to become the majority. In its aspirations and its political program it seeks to reflect not the will of a majority of the nation, but on the contrary, the embodiment of the conscious will of the proletariat alone [...] It expresses only the will and the consciousness of the most advanced and most revolutionary section of the urban-industrial proletariat. It tries to expand that will and to clear a way for a majority of the workers by making them conscious of their own interests. "The will of the nation" or its majority is not therefore an idol for Social Democracy before which it humbly prostrates itself. On the contrary, the historical mission of Social Democracy is based above all on revolutionizing and forming the will of the "nation"; that is, its working-class majority.¹⁰

Lenin's counter-argument in "Critical Observations on the National Question" and "The Right of Nations to Self-Determination" (1913-1914)

Lenin responded to Rosa Luxemburg's 1908-1909 series of articles on The National Question and Autonomy (especially the article "The Right of Nations to Self-Determination") with two series of articles in the magazine *Prosveshcheniye* in 1913 and 1914. In the first series (published in issues 10, 11 and 12 [October-December] of 1913), entitled "Critical Remarks on the

¹⁰ Luxemburg, 1908-1909a, pt. 4, paras. 2, 3, 16 and 19.

National Question,” Lenin made initial comments especially on the issues of autonomy and local self-government, as expounded by Luxemburg in her article “The Autonomy of the Kingdom of Poland” (from the 1908-1909 series about The National Question and Autonomy).¹¹ He gave examples of how local autonomy could be established in the case of Poland specifically.

[... In] advocating centralism we advocate exclusively democratic centralism [...] Far from precluding local self-government, with autonomy for regions having special economic and social conditions, a distinct national composition of the population, and so forth, democratic centralism necessarily demands both. In Russia centralism is constantly confused with tyranny and bureaucracy. This confusion has naturally arisen from the history of Russia, but even so it is quite inexcusable for a Marxist to yield to it. This can best be explained by a concrete example. In her lengthy article “The National Question and Autonomy”, Rosa Luxemburg [commits] curious errors [... Let] us see how she defines autonomy. Rosa Luxemburg admits — and being a Marxist she is of course bound to admit — that all the major and important economic and political questions of capitalist society must be dealt with exclusively by the central parliament of the whole country concerned, not by the autonomous Diets of the individual regions. These questions include tariff policy, laws

¹¹ Luxemburg, 1988.

governing commerce and industry, transport and means of communication (railways, post, telegraph, telephone, etc.), the army, the taxation system, civil and criminal law, the general principles of education (for example, the law on purely secular schools, on universal education, on the minimum programme, on democratic school management, etc.), the labour protection laws, and political liberties (right of association), etc., etc. The autonomous Diets — on the basis of the general laws of the country — should deal with questions of purely local [...] significance. Amplifying this idea in great — not to say excessive — detail, Rosa Luxemburg mentions, for example, the construction of local railways and local highways [, etc. ...] Obviously, one cannot conceive of a modern, truly democratic state that did not grant such autonomy to every region having any appreciably distinct economic and social features, populations of a specific national composition, etc. The principle of centralism, which is essential for the development of capitalism, is not violated by this (local and regional) autonomy, but on the contrary is applied by it democratically, not bureaucratically. The broad, free and rapid development of capitalism would be impossible, or at least greatly impeded, by the absence of such autonomy, which facilitates the concentration of capital, the development of the productive forces, the unity of the bourgeoisie and the unity of the proletariat on a country-wide scale; for bureaucratic

interference in purely local [...] questions is one of the greatest obstacles to economic and political development in general [...] One cannot help smiling, therefore, when reading how our magnificent Rosa Luxemburg tries to prove, with a very serious air and “purely Marxist” phrases, that the demand for autonomy [within the Russian Empire] is applicable only to Poland and only by way of exception!¹²

Here Lenin refers to the part of the article “The Autonomy of the Kingdom of Poland” in which Rosa Luxemburg gives the example of other regions of the Russian Empire, as in some parts of Lithuania and the Caucasus (and other regions where many different nationalities coexisted in the same small space) in which autonomy could not be applied according to national principles, since the most numerous nationality did not even constitute 50% of the population — unlike most regions in Poland, where the Poles constituted the overwhelming majority of the population. But Lenin was not convinced by these arguments and retorted.

[In] the case of Lithuania, for example, Rosa Luxemburg takes four gubernias — Vilna, Kovno, Grodno and Suwalki — assuring her readers (and herself) that these are inhabited “mainly” by Lithuanians; and by adding the inhabitants of these gubernias together she finds that Lithuanians constitute 23 per cent of the total population [...] — less than a third. The natural inference is that the

¹² Lenin, 1960-1970a, pp. 46-47.

idea of autonomy for Lithuania is “arbitrary and artificial” [...] The reader who is familiar with the commonly known defects of our Russian official statistics will quickly see Rosa Luxemburg’s mistake. Why take Grodno Gubernia where the Lithuanians constitute only 0.2 per cent [...] of the population? Why take the whole Vilna Gubernia and not its Troki Uyezd alone, where the Lithuanians constitute the majority of the population? [...] It is ridiculous to talk about the conditions and demands of modern capitalism while at the same time taking not the “modern”, not the “capitalist”, but the medieval, feudal and official-bureaucratic administrative divisions of Russia, and in their crudest form at that (gubernias instead of uyezds) [..., etc.] Plainly, there can be no question of any serious local reform in Russia until these divisions are abolished and superseded by a really “modern” division that really meets the requirements [...] of capitalism; and one of the modern requirements of capitalism is undoubtedly the greatest possible national uniformity of the population, for nationality and language identity are an important factor making for the complete conquest of the home market and for complete freedom of economic intercourse [...] The national composition of the population, however, is one of the very important economic factors, but not the sole and not the most important factor. Towns, for example, play an extremely important economic role under capitalism [...] To cut the towns off from the villages and areas that

economically gravitate towards them, for the sake of the “national” factor, would be absurd and impossible. That is why Marxists must not take their stand entirely and exclusively on the “national-territorial” principle. The solution of the problem proposed by the last conference of Russian Marxists is far more correct [...]: “... *provide for wide regional autonomy [...] and fully democratic local self-government, and the boundaries of the self-governing and autonomous regions must be determined [...] by the local inhabitants themselves on the basis of their economic and social conditions, national make-up of the population, etc.*” Here the national composition of the population is placed on the same level as the other conditions (economic first, then social, etc.) which must serve as a basis for determining the new boundaries that will meet the needs of modern capitalism, not of bureaucracy and Asiatic barbarism. The local population alone can “assess” those conditions with full precision, and on that basis the central parliament of the country will determine the boundaries of the autonomous regions and the powers of autonomous Diets.¹³

Thus, Lenin accused Luxemburg of still being stuck with static schemes from past times to assess national divisions and suggested that she did not really trust the ability of local populations to adjust autonomously in an arrangement convenient to them from a social as well as economic point of view.

¹³ Lenin, 1960-1970a, pp. 47-48, 50-51.

In “Critical Remarks on the National Question,” Lenin cited Rosa Luxemburg directly in only one specific case (that of local autonomy as applied in the case of Poland). But it was in the next series of articles — published in *Prosveshcheniye*, nos. 4-6 [April-mail], 1914 — entitled “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination” that Lenin rolled out his longest and most detailed critique of Rosa Luxemburg’s view on self-determination of nations (as explained in her 1908-1909 series of articles in *Przeglad Socialdemokratyczny*).

*The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*¹⁴

This is the text in which Lenin discusses Rosa Luxemburg’s positions on self-determination of nations (and nationalism in general) at length and in more detail. As Rosa Luxemburg had given herself the luxury of writing an extensive series of articles on The National Question and Autonomy in 1908-1909, Lenin also responded with a second large series of articles, jointly entitled “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” spread over numbers 4, 5 and 6 [April-May] 1914 of *Prosveshcheniye*. Lenin began by trying to define exactly what “self-determination of nations” is.

Clause 9 of the Russian Marxists’ Programme, which deals with the right of nations to self-determination, has (as we have already pointed out in *Prosveshcheniye*) given rise lately to a crusade on the part of the opportunists. The Russian liquidator Semkovsky, in the St. Petersburg liquidationist newspaper, and the Bundist Liebman and the Ukrainian nationalist-socialist Yurkevich in their respective periodicals have violently

¹⁴ Lenin, 1960-1970b.

attacked this clause and treated it with supreme contempt. There is no doubt that this campaign of a motley array of opportunists against our Marxist Programme is closely connected with present-day nationalist vacillations in general. Hence we consider a detailed examination of this question timely. We would mention, in passing, that none of the opportunists named above has offered a single argument of his own; they all merely repeat what Rosa Luxemburg said in her lengthy Polish article of 1908-09, "The National Question and Autonomy". In our exposition we shall deal mainly with the "original" arguments of this last-named author [...] What is meant by the self-determination of nations? Naturally, this is the first question that arises when any attempt is made at a Marxist examination of what is known as self-determination. What should be understood by that term? Should the answer be sought in legal definitions deduced from all sorts of "general concepts" of law? Or is it rather to be sought in a historico-economic study of the national movements? It is not surprising that the Semkovskys, Liebmanns and Yurkeviches did not even think of raising this question [... Surprising is] the fact that Rosa Luxemburg, who declaims a great deal about the supposedly abstract and metaphysical nature of the clause in question, should herself succumb to the sin of abstraction and metaphysics. It is Rosa Luxemburg herself who is continually lapsing into generalities about self-determination (to the extent even of

philosophising amusingly on the question of how the will of the nation is to be ascertained), without anywhere clearly and precisely asking herself whether the gist of the matter lies in legal definitions or in the experience of the national movements throughout the world. A precise formulation of this question, which no Marxist can avoid, would at once destroy nine-tenths of Rosa Luxemburg's arguments. This is not the first time that national movements have arisen in Russia, nor are they peculiar to that country alone. Throughout the world, the period of the final victory of capitalism over feudalism has been linked up with national movements. For the complete victory of commodity production, the bourgeoisie must capture the home market, and there must be politically united territories whose population speak a single language, with all obstacles to the development of that language and to its consolidation in literature eliminated [... The] tendency of every national movement is towards the formation of national states, under which these requirements of modern capitalism are best satisfied. The most profound economic factors drive towards this goal, and, therefore, for the whole of Western Europe, nay, for the entire civilised world, the national state is typical and normal for the capitalist period. Consequently, if we want to grasp the meaning of self-determination of nations, not by juggling with legal definitions, or "inventing" abstract definitions, but by examining the historico-economic conditions of the national movements, we must inevitably

reach the conclusion that the self-determination of nations means the political separation of these nations from alien national bodies, and the formation of an independent national state. Later on we shall see still other reasons why it would be wrong to interpret the right to self-determination as meaning anything but the right to existence as a separate state. At present, we must deal with Rosa Luxemburg's efforts to "dismiss" the inescapable conclusion that profound economic factors underlie the urge-towards a national state. [...] She confines herself to the following remarks in criticism of Kautsky: "*This 'best' national state is only an abstraction, which can easily be developed and defended theoretically, but which does not correspond to reality.*" (Przełzsd Socjaldemokratyczny, 1908, No. 6, p. 499.) And in corroboration of this emphatic statement there follow arguments to the effect that the "right to self-determination" of small nations is made illusory by the development of the great capitalist powers and by imperialism. "*Can one seriously speak,*" Rosa Luxemburg exclaims, "*about the 'self-determination' of the formally independent Montenegrins, Bulgarians, Rumanians, Serbs, Greeks, partly even the Swiss, whose independence is itself a result of the political struggle and the diplomatic game of the 'concert of Europe'?!"*" (P. 500.) The state that best suits these conditions is "*not a national state, as Kautsky believes, but a predatory one*". Some dozens of figures are quoted relating to the size of

British, French and other colonial possessions. After reading such arguments, one cannot help marvelling at the author's ability to misunderstand the how and the why of things. To teach Kautsky, with a serious mien, that small states are economically dependent on big ones, that a struggle is raging among the bourgeois states for the predatory suppression of other nations, and that imperialism and colonies exist — all this is a ridiculous and puerile attempt to be clever, for none of this has the slightest bearing on the subject. Not only small states, but even Russia, for example, is entirely dependent, economically, on the power of the imperialist finance capital of the "rich" bourgeois countries. Not only the miniature Balkan states, but even nineteenth-century America was, economically, a colony of Europe, as Marx pointed out in *Capital*. Kautsky, like any Marxist, is, of course, well aware of this, but that has nothing whatever to do with the question of national movements and the national state. For the question of the political self-determination of nations and their independence as states in bourgeois society, Rosa Luxemburg has substituted the question of their economic independence. This is just as intelligent as if someone, in discussing the programmatic demand for the supremacy of parliament, i.e., the assembly of people's representatives, in a bourgeois state, were to expound the perfectly correct conviction that big capital dominates in a bourgeois country, whatever the regime in it. There is no doubt that the greater part of Asia, the most densely

populated continent, consists either of colonies of the “Great Powers”, or of states that are extremely dependent and oppressed as nations. But does this commonly known circumstance in any way shake the undoubted fact that in Asia itself the conditions for the most complete development of commodity production and the freest, widest and speediest growth of capitalism have been created only in Japan, i.e., only in an independent national state? The latter is a bourgeois state, and for that reason has itself begun to oppress other nations and to enslave colonies. We cannot say whether Asia will have had time to develop into a system of independent national states, like Europe, before the collapse of capitalism, but it remains an undisputed fact that capitalism, having awakened Asia, has called forth national movements everywhere in that continent, too; that the tendency of these movements is towards the creation of national states in Asia; that it is such states that ensure the best conditions for the development of capitalism. The example of Asia speaks in favour of Kautsky and against Rosa Luxemburg. The example of the Balkan states likewise contradicts her, for anyone can now see that the best conditions for the development of capitalism in the Balkans are created precisely in proportion to the creation of independent national states in that peninsula. Therefore, Rosa Luxemburg notwithstanding, the example of the whole of progressive and civilised mankind, the example of the Balkans and that of Asia prove

that Kautsky's proposition is absolutely correct: the national state is the rule and the "norm" of capitalism; the multinational state represents backwardness, or is an exception. From the standpoint of national relations, the best conditions for the development of capitalism are undoubtedly provided by the national state. This does not mean, of course, that such a state, which is based on bourgeois relations, can eliminate the exploitation and oppression of nations. It only means that Marxists cannot lose sight of the powerful economic factors that give rise to the urge to create national states. It means that "self-determination of nations" in the Marxists' Programme cannot, from a historico-economic point of view, have any other meaning than political self-determination, state independence, and the formation of a national state. The conditions under which the bourgeois-democratic demand for a "national state" should be supported from a Marxist, i.e., class-proletarian, point of view will be dealt with in detail below. For the present, we shall confine ourselves to the definition of the concept of "self-determination".¹⁵

Thus, Lenin was intent upon deconstructing Luxemburg's arguments of 1908-1909. He began by defining what he meant by "self-determination of nations" and did so in the most radical way possible, meaning the formation of independent states, something that Luxemburg denied to her own native Poland. We saw that Luxemburg, like Marxists in general, admitted that in

¹⁵ Lenin, 1960-1970b, pp. 395-400.

the era of nascent capitalism nationalism had a positive role in the formation of a unified home market, but she had pointed out that in the epoch of imperialism nationalism had lost any positive role it could have had, and was becoming predatory. Lenin qualified this transformation and said that, even in the time of imperialism, there are still countries in which capitalism is “being born,” developing (for example, in the colonies and economically backward countries) and there nationalism may still have some positive role to play, insofar as it can boost the initial capitalist development of these countries.

Next, Lenin accused Rosa Luxemburg of failing to investigate Russia’s specific stage of development in her analysis of the national question (and of the need for point 9 in the R.S.D.L.P. program). He started his reasoning with a quote from Rosa Luxemburg.

“Despite the elasticity of the principle of ‘the right of nations to self-determination’, which is a mere platitude, and, obviously, equally applicable, not only to the nations inhabiting Russia, but also to the nations inhabiting Germany and Austria, Switzerland and Sweden, America and Australia, we do not find it in the programmes of any of the present-day socialist parties...” (Przełzdz, No. 6, p. 483) This is how Rosa Luxemburg opens her attack upon §9 of the Marxist programme. In trying to foist on us the conception that this clause in the programme is a “mere platitude”, Rosa Luxemburg herself falls victim to this error, alleging with amusing boldness that this point is, “obviously, equally applicable” to Russia, Germany, etc. Obviously, we shall reply, Rosa Luxemburg has decided to make her article a collection of errors in logic that

could be used for schoolboy exercises. For Rosa Luxemburg's tirade is sheer nonsense and a mockery of the historically concrete presentation of the question. If one interprets the Marxist programme in Marxist fashion, not in a childish way, one will without difficulty grasp the fact that it refers to bourgeois-democratic national movements. That being the case, it is "obvious" that this programme "sweepingly", and as a "mere platitude", etc., covers all instances of bourgeois-democratic national movements. No less obvious to Rosa Luxemburg, if she gave the slightest thought to it, is the conclusion that our programme refers only to cases where such a movement is actually in existence. Had she given thought to these obvious considerations, Rosa Luxemburg would have easily perceived what nonsense she was talking. In accusing us of uttering a "platitude" she has used against us the argument that no mention is made of the right to self-determination in the programmes of countries where there are no bourgeois-democratic national movements [...]. In this respect Rosa Luxemburg has lost sight of the most important thing—the difference between countries where bourgeois-democratic reforms have long been completed, and those where they have not. The crux of the matter lies in this difference. Rosa Luxemburg's complete disregard of it transforms her verbose article into a collection of empty and meaningless platitudes. The epoch of bourgeois-democratic revolutions in Western, continental Europe embraces a fairly definite period,

approximately between 1789 and 1871. This was precisely the period of national movements and the creation of national states. When this period drew to a close, Western Europe had been transformed into a settled system of bourgeois states, which, as a general rule, were nationally uniform states. Therefore, to seek the right to self-determination in the programmes of West-European socialists at this time of day is to betray one's ignorance of the ABC of Marxism. In Eastern Europe and Asia the period of bourgeois democratic revolutions did not begin until 1905. The revolutions in Russia, Persia, Turkey and China, the Balkan wars — such is the chain of world events of our period in our "Orient". And only a blind man could fail to see in this chain of events the awakening of a whole series of bourgeois democratic national movements which strive to create nationally independent and nationally uniform states. It is precisely and solely because Russia and the neighbouring countries are passing through this period that we must have a clause in our programme on the right of nations to self-determination.¹⁶

In the lines above, Lenin made the difference between the countries that had already carried out their bourgeois revolution and those that were going through it at that time, among which he placed Russia (since Vladimir Ilyich was writing these lines after the 1905 Revolution, but before the 1917 October Revolution). Thus, Lenin accused Luxemburg of

¹⁶ Lenin, 1960-1970b, pp. 404-406.

not examining the issue from the point of view of Russia's concrete conditions, but from a general, abstract point of view. On the other hand, Lenin also responded to Luxemburg's accusation that point 9 of the R.S.D.L.P. program (on the self-determination of nations) did not provide a practical guide for solving the country's concrete national problems.

[Rosa Luxemburg] writes: “§9 gives no practical lead on the day-by-day policy of the proletariat, no practical solution of national problems”. Let us examine this argument, which elsewhere is formulated in such a way that it makes §9 look quite meaningless, or else commits us to support all national aspirations [...] The demand for a “yes” or “no” reply to the question of secession in the case of every nation may seem a very “practical” one. In reality it is absurd; it is metaphysical in theory, while in practice it leads to subordinating the proletariat to the bourgeoisie's policy. The bourgeoisie always places its national demands in the forefront, and does so in categorical fashion. With the proletariat, however, these demands are subordinated to the interests of the class struggle. Theoretically, you cannot say in advance whether the bourgeois-democratic revolution will end in a given nation seceding from another nation, or in its equality with the latter; in either case, the important thing for the proletariat is to ensure the development of its class. For the bourgeoisie it is important to hamper this development by pushing the aims of its “own” nation before those of the proletariat. That is why the proletariat confines

itself, so to speak, to the negative demand for recognition of the right to self-determination, without giving guarantees to any nation, and without undertaking to give anything at the expense of another nation. This may not be “practical”, but it is in effect the best guarantee for the achievement of the most democratic of all possible solutions [...] The most practical procedure is to say a plain “yes” in favour of the secession of a particular nation rather than in favour of all nations having the right to secede! The proletariat is opposed to such practicality. While recognising equality and equal rights to a national state, it values above all and places foremost the alliance of the proletarians of all nations, and assesses any national demand, any national separation, from the angle of the workers’ class struggle [...] *By supporting the right to secession, we are told, you are supporting the bourgeois nationalism of the oppressed nations.* This is what Rosa Luxemburg says [...] Our reply to this is: No, it is to the bourgeoisie that a “practical” solution of this question is important. To the workers the important thing is to distinguish the principles of the two trends. Insofar as the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation fights the oppressor, we are always, in every case, and more strongly than anyone else, in favour, for we are the staunchest and the most consistent enemies of oppression. But insofar as the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nation stands for its own bourgeois nationalism, we stand against. We fight against the privileges and violence of the oppressor nation, and do not in

any way condone strivings for privileges on the part of the oppressed nation. If, in our political agitation, we fail to advance and advocate the slogan of the right to secession, we shall play into the hands, not only of the bourgeoisie, but also of the feudal landlords and the absolutism of the oppressor nation. Kautsky long ago used this argument against Rosa Luxemburg, and the argument is indisputable. When, in her anxiety not to “assist” the nationalist bourgeoisie of Poland, Rosa Luxemburg rejects the right to secession in the programme of the Marxists in Russia, she is in fact assisting the Great-Russian Black Hundreds [...] Carried away by the struggle against nationalism in Poland, Rosa Luxemburg has forgotten the nationalism of the Great Russians, although it is this nationalism that is the most formidable at the present time. It is a nationalism that is more feudal than bourgeois, and is the principal obstacle to democracy and to the proletarian struggle. The bourgeois nationalism of any oppressed nation has a general democratic content that is directed against oppression, and it is this content that we unconditionally support. At the same time we strictly distinguish it from the tendency towards national exclusiveness; we fight against the tendency of the Polish bourgeois to oppress the Jews, etc., etc. [...] In Russia, the creation of an independent national state remains, for the time being, the privilege of the Great-Russian nation alone. We, the Great-Russian proletarians, who defend no privileges

whatever, do not defend this privilege either. We are fighting on the ground of a definite state; we unite the workers of all nations living in this state; we cannot vouch for any particular path of national development, for we are marching to our class goal along all possible paths. However, we cannot move towards that goal unless we combat all nationalism, and uphold the equality of the various nations. Whether the Ukraine, for example, is destined to form an independent state is a matter that will be determined by a thousand unpredictable factors. Without attempting idle “guesses”, we firmly uphold something that is beyond doubt: the right of the Ukraine to form such a state. We respect this right; we do not uphold the privileges of Great Russians with regard to Ukrainians; we educate the masses in the spirit of recognition of that right, in the spirit of rejecting state privileges for any nation.¹⁷

Lenin stressed that in principle the Bolsheviks were for the *right* of all peoples to self-determination and even secession. However, whether the Bolshevik party will support any concrete independence or secession, this will be analyzed exclusively from the point view of the class interests of the proletariat. It is important to note that Lenin defends not only the self-determination of peoples but also the (even more radical) right to secession. The issue of secession has a more pressing significance in multinational states where separatist temptations tend to be greater than in the more “homogeneous” nation states.

Lenin went further. He said that in the 1896 Congress of

¹⁷ Lenin, 1960-1970b, pp. 409-413.

the (Second) International, European Social Democracy as a whole took an official position that, according to him, was identical to that of R.S.D.L.P. (Russian Social Democratic Labor Party) on the question of the self-determination of nations.

The Resolution of the London International Congress, 1896, [...] reads: “*This Congress declares that it stands for the full right of all nations to self-determination and expresses its sympathy for the workers of every country now suffering under the yoke of military, national or other absolutism. This Congress calls upon the workers of all these countries to join the ranks of the class-conscious workers of the whole world in order jointly to fight for the defeat of international capitalism and for the achievement of the aims of international Social-Democracy.*” As we have already pointed out, our opportunists—Semkovsky, Liebman and Yurkevich—are simply unaware of this resolution. But Rosa Luxemburg knows it and quotes the full text, which contains the same expression as that contained in our programme, viz., “self-determination”. How does Rosa Luxemburg remove this obstacle from the path of her “original” theory? Oh, quite simply: “... *the whole emphasis lies in the second part of the resolution ... its declarative character ... one can refer to it only by mistake!*”. The feebleness and utter confusion of our author are simply amazing [...] Rosa Luxemburg does not venture to state openly whether she regards the above resolution as correct or erroneous. She shifts and shuffles as if

counting on the inattentive or ill-informed reader, who forgets the first part of the resolution by the time he has started reading the second, or who has never heard of the discussion that took place in the socialist press prior to the London Congress [...] Rosa Luxemburg's point of view was voiced during the discussions which took place prior to the London Congress, mainly in the columns of *Die Neue Zeit*, organ of the German Marxists; in essence this point of view was defeated in the International! That is the crux of the matter, which the Russian reader must particularly bear in mind.¹⁸

Here Lenin was refuting Luxemburg's version of events in her 1896 article "The Polish Question at the International Congress in London." In that article, Luxemburg described the events of the 1896 Congress of the Second International as if it had been a defeat for the Polish Socialist Party's proposal of a draft resolution in which the International would support the cause of Poland's independence. Generally, third party observers see the 1896 resolution as a compromise, not taking up the cause of Poland's independence, but giving the International's support for the cause of self-determination of nations in general. It is this last aspect that Lenin emphasized in order to say that the position of R.S.D.L.P. in favor of the self-determination of nations *was* the position of the Socialist International.

That is the substance, the underlying principle, of the resolution adopted by the Conference of Russian Marxists held in the summer of 1913. Some people profess to see a

¹⁸ Lenin, 1960-1970b, pp. 430-432.

“contradiction” in the fact that while point 4 of this resolution, which recognises the right to self-determination and secession, seems to “concede” the maximum to nationalism (in reality, the recognition of the *right of all nations to self-determination* implies the maximum of democracy and the minimum of nationalism), point 5 warns the workers against the nationalist slogans of the bourgeoisie of any nation and demands the unity and amalgamation of the workers of all nations in internationally united proletarian organisations. But this is a “contradiction” only for extremely shallow minds, which, for instance, cannot grasp why the unity and class solidarity of the Swedish and the Norwegian proletariat *gained* when the Swedish workers upheld Norway’s freedom to secede and form an independent state.¹⁹

In “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” there is an interesting footnote that very concretely shows Lenin’s position in relation to the conceptual triangle bringing together the concepts of self-determination, autonomy and federation.

By the way, it is not difficult to see why, from a Social-Democratic point of view, the right to “self-determination” means neither federation nor autonomy (although, speaking in the abstract, both come under the category of “self-determination”). The right to federation is simply meaningless, since federation implies a bilateral contract. It goes

¹⁹ Lenin, 1960-1970b, pp. 434-435.

without saying that Marxists cannot include the defence of federalism in general in their programme. As far as autonomy is concerned Marxists defend, not the “right” to autonomy, but autonomy itself, as a general universal principle of a democratic state with a mixed national composition, and a great variety of geographical and other conditions. Consequently, the recognition of the “right of nations to autonomy” is as absurd as that of the “right of nations to federation”.²⁰

As far as the excerpt above, Rosa Luxemburg certainly would not have agreed with the part on “self-determination of nations,” but would have agreed with the parts on federation/federalism (concepts she repudiated as a Bakunist anarchist idea when applied to socialism) and on autonomy (which she agrees with as a corrective to the excesses of centralization, her favorite arrangement).

In another part of the text, Lenin also made it clear that, in his view (and that of the Bolsheviks since 1903), “the ‘right of nations to self-determination’ [...] has always been understood to mean the right to secession.”²¹ Certainly, Rosa Luxemburg did not agree with “rights to secession” in general!

Despite these disagreements with Rosa Luxemburg and her SDKPiL (“Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania”) supporters on the national issue, Lenin remarked that the R.S.D.L.P. and the SDKPiL were in the same Marxist camp and opposed to the Polish Socialist Party, which, according to him, confused the national and class question in Poland in a non-marxist way.

²⁰ Lenin, 1960-1970b, pp. 441.

²¹ Lenin, 1960-1970b, p. 442.

Incidentally, this reveals how groundless and even frivolous are the attempts sometimes made by [the Polish Socialist Party] to “use” our disagreements with Rosa Luxemburg against Polish Social-Democracy. [The Polish Socialist Party is] not a proletarian or a socialist party, but a petty-bourgeois nationalist party [...] On the other hand no Russian Social-Democrat has ever “repented” of the close relations and unity that have been established with the Polish Social-Democrats. The Polish Social-Democrats have rendered a great historical service by creating the first really Marxist, proletarian party in Poland, a country imbued with nationalist aspirations and passions. Yet the service the Polish Social-Democrats have rendered is a great one, not because Rosa Luxemburg has talked a lot of nonsense about §9 of the Russian Marxists’ Programme, but despite that sad circumstance. The question of the “right to self-determination” is of course not so important to the Polish Social-Democrats as it is to the Russian. It is quite understandable that in their zeal (sometimes a little excessive, perhaps) to combat the nationalistically blinded petty bourgeoisie of Poland the Polish Social-Democrats should overdo things. No Russian Marxist has ever thought of blaming the Polish Social-Democrats for being opposed to the secession of Poland. These Social-Democrats err only when, like Rosa Luxemburg, they try to deny the necessity of including the

recognition of the right to self-determination in the Programme of the Russian Marxists.²²

Lenin closed his article with a proclamation of his position in a nutshell.

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.²³

*“The Crisis of Social Democracy”, a pamphlet by “Junius”*²⁴

The next episode of the interactions between Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin on the national question was a pamphlet that Luxemburg wrote when she was in prison in 1915 under the pseudonym “Junius.” Published in Zurich in January 1916, it was about the crisis that overwhelmed social democracy with the beginning of the First World War. Then, with rare exceptions (e.g. the social democrats of Russia and Serbia), the social democratic parties of Europe voted in favor of war credits for their respective governments. The pamphlet scathingly criticized this degeneration in the Western European social democratic movement. It dealt with general political issues, but in Chapter 7 it examined the national question specifically. And it did so in a way that contradicted many of Lenin’s principles on that topic. For example, Luxemburg criticized one of the Russian

²² Lenin, 1960-1970b, pp. 429-430.

²³ Lenin, 1960-1970b, p. 454.

²⁴ Luxemburg, 1916.

Bolshevik's favorite themes: the allegedly progressive character of the nationalism of small oppressed nations.

This brings us to the peculiar position of the "small nation." A classic example of such "national wars!" is Serbia. If ever a state, according to formal considerations, had the right of national defence on its side, that state is Serbia. Deprived through Austrian annexations of its national unity, threatened by Austria in its very existence as a nation, forced by Austria into war, it is fighting, according to all human conceptions, for existence, for freedom, and for the civilisation of its people. But if the social democratic group is right in its position, then the Serbian social democrats who protested against the war in the parliament at Belgrade and refused to vote war credits are actually traitors to the most vital interests of their own nation. In reality the Serbian socialists Laptchevic and Kaclerovic have not only enrolled their names in letters of gold in the annals of the international socialist movement, but have shown a clear historical conception of the real causes of the war. In voting against war credits they therefore have done their country the best possible service. Serbia is formally engaged in a national war of defence. But its monarchy and its ruling classes are filled with expansionist desires as are the ruling classes in all modern states. They are indifferent to ethnic lines, and thus their warfare assumes an aggressive character. Thus Serbia is today reaching out toward the Adriatic coast where it is fighting out a real

imperialistic conflict with Italy on the backs of the Albanians, a conflict whose final outcome will be decided not by either of the powers directly interested, but by the great powers that will speak the last word on terms of peace. But above all this we must not forget: behind Serbian nationalism stands Russian imperialism. Serbia itself is only a pawn in the great game of world politics. A judgment of the war in Serbia from a point of view that fails to take these great relations and the general world political background into account is necessarily without foundation [...]. All small states, as for instance Holland, are today in a position like that of the Balkan states. "When the ship leaks, the hole must be stopped"; and what, forsooth, could little Holland fight for but for its national existence and for the independence of its people? If we consider here merely the determination of the Dutch people, even of its ruling classes, the question is doubtlessly one purely of national defence. But again proletarian politics cannot judge according to the subjective purposes of a single country. Here again it must take its position as a part of the International, according to the whole complexity of the world's political situation. Holland, too, whether it wishes to be or not, is only a small wheel in the great machine of modern world politics and diplomacy. This would become clear at once, if Holland were actually torn into the maelstrom of the world war. Its opponents would direct their attacks against its colonies. Automatically Dutch warfare would

turn to the defence of its present possessions. The defence of the national independence of the Dutch people on the North Sea would expand concretely to the defence of its rule and right of exploitation over the Malays in the East Indian Archipelago. But not enough: Dutch militarism, if forced to rely upon itself, would be crushed like a nutshell in the whirlpool of the world war. Whether it wished to or not it would become a member of one of the great national alliances. On one side or the other it must be the bearer and the tool of purely imperialistic tendencies. Thus it is always the historic milieu of modern imperialism that determines the character of the war in the individual countries, and this milieu makes a war of national self-defence impossible.²⁵

Lenin's Response with "The Junius Pamphlet"

Lenin "replied" to Luxemburg without knowing that he was doing so. Unaware that under the pseudonym "Junius" was Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin made both praiseworthy and critical comments about the pamphlet "The Crisis of Social Democracy." His response was in a review article entitled "The Junius Pamphlet," published in the first issue (October 1916) of *Sbornik Sotsial-Demokrata*.

The first of Junius's erroneous propositions is embodied in the fifth thesis of

²⁵ Luxemburg, 1916, chpt. 7, paras. 28 and 30.

the Internationale group. *“National wars are no longer possible in the epoch (era) of this unbridled imperialism. National interests serve only as an instrument of deception, in order to place the working masses at the service of their mortal enemy, imperialism.”* The beginning of the fifth thesis, which concludes with the above statement, discusses the nature of the present war as an imperialist war. It may be that this negation of national wars generally is either an oversight, or an accidental overstatement in emphasising the perfectly correct idea that the present war is an imperialist war, not a national war. This is a mistake that must be examined, for various Social-Democrats, in view of the false assertions that the present war is a national war, have likewise mistakenly denied the possibility of any national war. Junius is perfectly right in emphasising the decisive influence of the “imperialist atmosphere” of the present war, in maintaining that behind Serbia stands Russia, “behind Serbian nationalism stands Russian imperialism”, and that the participation of, say, Holland in the war would likewise be imperialist, for, first, Holland would be defending her colonies and, second, would be allied with one of the imperialist coalitions. That is irrefutable in respect to the present war. And when Junius stresses what for him is most important, namely, the struggle against the “phantom of national war,” “which at present holds sway over Social Democratic policies” (p. 81), then it must be admitted that his views are both

correct and fully to the point. The only mistake, however, would be to exaggerate this truth, to depart from the Marxist requirement of concreteness, to apply the appraisal of this war to all wars possible under imperialism, to ignore the national movements against imperialism. The sole argument in defence of the thesis, “national wars are no longer possible”, is that the world has been divided among a small group of “great” imperialist powers and for that reason any war, even if it starts as a national war, is transformed into an imperialist war involving the interest of one of the imperialist powers or coalitions (Junius, p. 81). The fallacy of this argument is obvious. That all dividing lines, both in nature and society, are conventional and dynamic, and that every phenomenon might, under certain conditions, be transformed into its opposite, is, of course, a basic proposition of Marxist dialectics. A national war might be transformed into an imperialist war and vice versa. Here is an example: the wars of the Great French Revolution began as national wars and indeed were such. They were revolutionary wars — the defence of the great revolution against a coalition of counter-revolutionary monarchies. But when Napoleon founded the French Empire and subjugated a number of big, viable and long-established national European states, these national wars of the French became imperialist wars and in turn led to wars of national liberation against Napoleonic imperialism. Only a sophist can disregard the difference between an imperialist

and a national war on the grounds that one might develop into the other. Not infrequently have dialectics served—and the history of Greek philosophy is an example—as a bridge to sophistry. But we remain dialecticians and we combat sophistry not by denying the possibility of all transformations in general, but by analysing the given phenomenon in its concrete setting and development. Transformation of the present imperialist war of 1914-16 into a national war is highly improbable, for the class that represents progressive development is the proletariat which is objectively striving to transform it into a civil war against the bourgeoisie. Also this: there is no very considerable difference between the forces of the two coalitions, and international finance capital has created a reactionary bourgeoisie everywhere. But such a transformation should not be proclaimed impossible: if the European proletariat remains impotent, say, for twenty years; if the present war ends in victories like Napoleon's and in the subjugation of a number of viable national states; if the transition to socialism of non-European imperialism (primarily Japanese and American) is also held up for twenty years by a war between these two countries, for example, then a great national war in Europe would be possible. It would hurl Europe back several decades. That is improbable. But not impossible, for it is undialectical, unscientific and theoretically wrong to regard the course of world history as smooth and always in a forward direction, without occasional gigantic

leaps back. Further. National wars waged by colonies and semicolonies in the imperialist era are not only probable but inevitable. About 1,000 million people, or over half of the world's population, live in the colonies and semi-colonies (China, Turkey, Persia). The national liberation movements there are either already very strong, or are growing and maturing. Every war is the continuation of politics by other means. The continuation of national liberation politics in the colonies will inevitably take the form of national wars against imperialism. Such wars might lead to an imperialist war of the present "great" imperialist powers, but on the other hand they might not. It will depend on many factors. [... Even] in Europe national wars in the imperialist epoch cannot be regarded as impossible. The "epoch of imperialism" made the present war an imperialist one and it inevitably engenders new imperialist wars (until the triumph of socialism). This "epoch" has made the policies of the present great powers thoroughly imperialist, but it by no means precludes national wars on the part of, say, small (annexed or nationally-oppressed) countries against the imperialist powers, just as it does not preclude large-scale national movements in Eastern Europe [...] That is one point. Another is that the superficial view that the war of a small state against a giant is hopeless should be countered by the observation that even a hopeless war is a war just the same. Besides, certain factors operating within the "giant" countries — the

outbreak of revolution, for example — can turn a “hopeless” war into a very “hopeful” one. We have dwelt in detail on the erroneous proposition that “national wars are no longer possible” not only because it is patently erroneous from the theoretical point of view [... This] mistake is very harmful also from the standpoint of practical politics, for it gives rise to the absurd propaganda of “disarmament,” since it is alleged that there can be no wars except reactionary wars. It also gives rise to the even more ludicrous and downright reactionary attitude of indifference to national movements. And such an attitude becomes chauvinism when members of the “great” European nations, that is, the nations which oppress the mass of small and colonial peoples, declare with a pseudo-scientific air: “national wars are no longer possible”! National wars against the imperialist powers are not only possible and probable; they are *inevitable, progressive and revolutionary* though of course, to be successful, they require either the concerted effort of huge numbers of people in the oppressed countries (hundreds of millions in our example of India and China), or a particularly favourable conjuncture of international conditions (e.g., the fact that the imperialist powers cannot interfere, being paralysed by exhaustion, by war, by their antagonism, etc.), or the simultaneous uprising of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie in one of the big powers (this latter eventuality holds

first place as the most desirable and favourable for the victory of the proletariat).²⁶

The above excerpt makes clear the great difference that existed in the thinking of Luxemburg and Lenin about the progressive and revolutionary potential of nationalist movements, especially the nationalist movement of oppressed nations. Lenin thought that the struggle of the oppressed nations contains a historically progressive and revolutionary element that can be used by the proletariat in its class struggle. Luxemburg is much more skeptical — and even suspicious — in this regard, drawing attention to the dangers of the bourgeois element that characterizes such nationalist movements, even in the case of oppressed small nationalities who, whether they want to or not, are pervaded by imperialism, either their own or other countries'. That was the case of Serbia with its mini-imperialism in the Balkans or in its connection with Russian imperialism.

*The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up*²⁷

In the same issue 1 of *Sbornik Sotzial-Demokrata* (October 1916) in which he authored "The Junius Pamphlet," Lenin also published another essay entitled "The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up." It was a response to a discussion that was carried out in the second issue (April 1916) of the Marxist magazine *Vorbote*, an organ of the so-called "Zimmerwald left." The Zimmerwald movement brought together a group of socialists who were against the First World War and against the support given by social democratic parties to the war effort. The Zimmerwald movement was heterogeneous, with a "right" wing (which even included mere pacifists), a "centrist" wing (with people like Kautsky who had a

²⁶ Lenin, 1960-1970e, pp. 308-312.

²⁷ Lenin, 1960-1970d.

distinctly Marxist rhetoric, but a much more moderate political action) and a “left” (which brought together people like Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin, some of whom even took a defeatist attitude, preaching to use the military defeat of their countries to carry out revolution). *Vorbote*, in a document signed by the editorial board of the Bolshevik newspaper *Sotsial-Demokrat* and the editorial board of the newspaper *Gazeta Robotnicza* (organ of the Polish Social Democrats associated with Rosa Luxemburg), published a series of theses for and against the principle of self-determination of nations (an issue that divided the Russian and Polish Social Democrats mentioned above). Lenin wrote the article “The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up” to defend his point of view in relation to that of the Poles. Since the ideas of the Polish Social Democrats reflected the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg, in a way Lenin was therein debating with Rosa Luxemburg (he cites her by name three times throughout the text). So it is worth noting some of the extra arguments that Lenin used in the essay. He began by analyzing the relationship between self-determination and socialist revolution.

We have affirmed that it would be a betrayal of socialism to refuse to implement the self-determination of nations under socialism. We are told in reply that “the right of self-determination is not applicable to a socialist society.” The difference is a radical one. Where does it stem from? “*We know,*” runs our opponents’ reasoning, “*that socialism will abolish every kind of national oppression since it abolishes the class interests that lead to it....*” What has this argument about the economic prerequisites for the abolition of national oppression, which are very well

known and undisputed, to do with a discussion of one of the forms of political oppression, namely, the forcible retention of one nation within the state frontiers of another? This is nothing but an attempt to evade political questions! [...] Is it to be supposed that victorious socialism, restoring and implementing full democracy all along the line, will refrain from democratically demarcating state frontiers and ignore the “sympathies” of the population? These questions need only be stated to make it quite clear that our Polish colleagues are sliding down from Marxism towards imperialist Economism. The old Economists, who made a caricature of Marxism, told the workers that “only the economic” was of importance to Marxists. The new Economists seem to think either that the democratic state of victorious socialism will exist without frontiers (like a “complex of sensations” without matter) or that frontiers will be delineated “only” in accordance with the needs of production. In actual fact its frontiers will be delineated democratically, i.e., in accordance with the will and “sympathies” of the population. Capitalism rides roughshod over these sympathies, adding more obstacles to the rapprochement of nations. Socialism, by organising production without class oppression, by ensuring the well-being of all members of the state, gives full play to the “sympathies” of the population, thereby

promoting and greatly accelerating the drawing together and fusion of the nations.²⁸

Lenin addressed a theme that pervaded not only the arguments of the Polish Social Democrats in general but also the thinking of Luxemburg in particular. It is the idea that, with socialism, the national question will lose its importance, since nationalism was a phenomenon of capitalism (having positive aspects in the era of nascent capitalism and being basically negative in the era of imperialism). Lenin disagrees with this (from his point of view) “economism”: that the mere socialization of the means of production (at the economic base of society) will automatically solve the problems of the political superstructure. Thus, Lenin not only thinks that the nationalism of oppressed nations can play a positive role even in the era of imperialism, but also that, even under socialism, the self-determination of nations in a democratic way can help bring nations closer together to a shared socialist destination (by decreasing the potential for tensions between peoples).

Lenin also criticized his Polish comrades’ view of the socialists’ relationship with “annexations.” His argument was two-pronged, exploring theory and practice.

What is annexation? We raised this question in a most definite manner in our theses [...] The Polish comrades did not reply to it: they evaded it, insisting (1) that they are against annexations and explaining (2) why they are against them [...] To be against annexations means to be in favour of the right to self-determination. To be “*against the forcible retention of any nation within the*

²⁸ Lenin, 1960-1970d, pp. 321 and 324.

frontiers of a given state” (we deliberately employed this slightly changed formulation of the same idea in Section 4 of our theses, and the Polish comrades answered us with complete clarity at the beginning of their §I, 4, that they “*are against the forcible retention of oppressed nations within the frontiers of the annexing state*”) — is the same as being in favour of the self-determination of nations. We do not want to haggle over words. If there is a party that says in its programme [...] that it is against annexations, against the forcible retention of oppressed nations within the frontiers of its state, we declare our complete agreement in principle with that party [...] In §3 of Part One of their theses the Polish comrades declare very definitely that they are against any kind of annexation. Unfortunately, in §4 of the same part we find an assertion that must be considered annexationist. It opens with the following — how can it be put more delicately? — the following strange phrase: “*The starting-point of Social-Democracy’s struggle against annexations, against the forcible retention of oppressed nations within the frontiers of the annexing state is renunciation of any defence of the fatherland, which, in the era of imperialism, is defence of the rights of one’s own bourgeoisie to oppress and plunder foreign peoples....*” What’s this? [...] Serbia, Galicia and Armenia would call their “revolt” against those who annexed them “defence of the fatherland” and would do so in all justice. It looks as if the Polish comrades are against this type of revolt on the grounds

that there is also a bourgeoisie in these annexed countries which also oppresses foreign peoples or, more exactly, could oppress them, since the question is one of the “right to oppress”. Consequently, the given war or revolt is not assessed on the strength of its real social content (the struggle of an oppressed nation for its liberation from the oppressor nation) but the possible exercise of the “right to oppress” by a bourgeoisie which is at present itself oppressed [...] There is nothing Marxist or even revolutionary in this argument. If we do not want to betray socialism we must support every revolt against our chief enemy, the bourgeoisie of the big states, provided it is not the revolt of a reactionary class. By refusing to support the revolt of annexed regions we become, objectively, annexationists. It is precisely in the “era of imperialism”, which is the era of nascent social revolution, that the proletariat will today give especially vigorous support to any revolt of the annexed regions so that tomorrow, or simultaneously, it may attack the bourgeoisie of the “great” power that is weakened by the revolt.²⁹

Lenin emphasized the potential of anti-colonial struggles that, according to him, weaken the main enemy, which is the bourgeoisie of the central countries. Polish Social Democrats, in their theses, did not make such a distinction between the bourgeoisie of oppressor countries and the bourgeoisie of oppressed countries, seeing them as equally exploitative or

²⁹ Lenin, 1960-1970d, pp. 328-329, 331-333.

unreliable as allies of the proletariat, while Lenin makes such a distinction.

*The Russian Revolution*³⁰

The next step in Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg's interactions on the national question came after the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia in October 1917. While in prison in Germany in 1918 during the First World War, Luxemburg wrote a manuscript that would only be published posthumously in 1922 by Paul Levy. In this manuscript, which received the title *The Russian Revolution*, Rosa critically analyzed the first measures of the Bolshevik government in power. Despite praising the Bolshevik revolutionary courage and determination, she criticized several of their policies, which she considered to be erroneous. One of them was the policy of the Bolsheviks in relation to nationalities. Taking up former theoretical concepts, Luxemburg examined their relation to actual practice during the Revolution as it was occurring in Russia in those months of 1917 and 1918.

The Bolsheviks are in part responsible for the fact that the military defeat was transformed into the collapse and breakdown of Russia. Moreover, the Bolsheviks themselves have, to a great extent, sharpened the objective difficulties of this situation by a slogan which they placed in the foreground of their policies: the so-called right of self-determination of peoples, or – something which was really implicit in this slogan – the disintegration of Russia. The formula of the right of the various nationalities of the Russian empire to determine their fate independently

³⁰ Luxemburg, 1918.

“even to the point of the right of governmental separation from Russia,” was proclaimed again with doctrinaire obstinacy as a special battle cry of Lenin and his comrades during their opposition against Miliukovist, and then Kerenskyan imperialism. It constituted the axis of their inner policy after the October Revolution also, and it constituted the entire platform of the Bolsheviks at Brest-Litovsk; all they had to oppose to the display of force by German imperialism. One is immediately struck with the obstinacy and rigid consistency with which Lenin and his comrades stuck to this slogan, a slogan which is in sharp contradiction to their otherwise outspoken centralism in politics as well as to the attitude they have assumed towards other democratic principles. While they showed a quite cool contempt for the Constituent Assembly, universal suffrage, freedom of press and assemblage, in short, for the whole apparatus of the basic democratic liberties of the people which, taken all together, constituted the “right of self-determination” inside Russia, [...] they championed the “popular vote” of the foreign nationalities of Russia on the question of which land they wanted to belong to, as the true palladium of all freedom and democracy [...] The contradiction that is so obvious here is all the harder to understand since the democratic forms of political life in each land, as we shall see, actually involve the most valuable and even indispensable foundations of socialist policy, whereas the famous “right of self-determination of nations” is nothing but

hollow, petty-bourgeois phraseology and humbug. Indeed, what is this right supposed to signify? It belongs to the ABC of socialist policy that socialism opposes every form of oppression, including also that of one nation by another [...] Lenin and his comrades clearly calculated that there was no surer method of binding the many foreign peoples within the Russian Empire to the cause of the revolution, to the cause of the socialist proletariat, than that of offering them, in the name of the revolution and of socialism, the most extreme and most unlimited freedom to determine their own fate. This was analogous to the policy of the Bolsheviks towards the Russian peasants, whose land-hunger was satisfied by the slogan of direct seizure of the noble estates and who were supposed to be bound thereby to the banner of the revolution and the proletarian government. In both cases, unfortunately, the calculation was entirely wrong. While Lenin and his comrades clearly expected that, as champions of national freedom even to the extent of “separation,” they would turn Finland, the Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, the Baltic countries, the Caucasus, etc., into so many faithful allies of the Russian Revolution, we have instead witnessed the opposite spectacle. One after another, these “nations” used the freshly granted freedom to ally themselves with German imperialism against the Russian Revolution as its mortal enemy, and, under German protection, to carry the banner of counter-revolution into Russia itself. The little game with the Ukraine at Brest,

which caused a decisive turn of affairs in those negotiations and brought about the entire inner and outer political situation at present prevailing for the Bolsheviks, is a perfect case in point. The conduct of Finland, Poland, Lithuania, the Baltic lands, the peoples of the Caucasus, shows most convincingly that we are not dealing here with an exceptional case, but with a typical phenomenon. To be sure, in all these cases, it was really not the “people” who engaged in these reactionary policies, but only the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois classes, who — in sharpest opposition to their own proletarian masses — perverted the “national right of self-determination” into an instrument of their counter-revolutionary class politics. But — and here we come to the very heart of the question — it is in this that the utopian, petty-bourgeois character of this nationalistic slogan resides: that in the midst of the crude realities of class society and when class antagonisms are sharpened to the uttermost, it is simply converted into a means of bourgeois class rule. The Bolsheviks were to be taught to their own great hurt and that of the revolution, that under the rule of capitalism there is no self-determination of peoples, that in a class society each class of the nation strives to “determine itself” in a different fashion, and that, for the bourgeois classes, the standpoint of national freedom is fully subordinated to that of class rule. The Finnish bourgeoisie, like the Ukrainian bourgeoisie, were unanimous in preferring the violent rule of Germany to national freedom, if the latter

should be bound up with Bolshevism. The hope of transforming these actual class relationships somehow into their opposite and of getting a majority vote for union with the Russian Revolution by depending on the revolutionary masses — if it was seriously meant by Lenin and Trotsky — represented an incomprehensible degree of optimism. And if it was only meant as a tactical flourish in the duel with the German politics of force, then it represented dangerous playing with fire. Even without German military occupation, the famous “popular plebiscite,” supposing that it had come to that in the border states, would have yielded a result, in all probability, which would have given the Bolsheviks little cause for rejoicing; for we must take into consideration the psychology of the peasant masses and of great sections of the petty bourgeoisie, and the thousand ways in which the bourgeoisie could have influenced the vote. Indeed, it can be taken as an unbreakable rule in these matters of plebiscites on the national question that the ruling class will either know how to prevent them where it doesn’t suit their purpose, or where they somehow occur, will know how to influence their results by all sorts of means, big and little, the same means which make it impossible to introduce socialism by a popular vote [...] Instead of warning the proletariat in the border countries against all forms of separatism as mere bourgeois traps, they did nothing but confuse the masses in all the border countries by their slogan and delivered them up to the demagogy of the

bourgeois classes. By this nationalistic demand they brought on the disintegration of Russia itself, pressed into the enemy's hand the knife which it was to thrust into the heart of the Russian Revolution.³¹

In the words above, Luxemburg examined not only the theoretical position of Lenin and the Bolsheviks on the question of nationalities but also the practical steps they took in this regard after seizing power with the 1917 October Revolution. Rosa noted that the Bolsheviks did not disown — and were being consistent with — their long-time proposals for the self-determination of nations. They upheld this policy in the first year of the revolution and Rosa pointed out that this was leading to catastrophic results as she had predicted. Instead of ensuring the loyalty of non-Russian nationalities, the promise of self-determination (to the extent of secession) was fueling nationalist passions to the point that there were several centrifugal tendencies in Ukraine, the Caucasus and elsewhere.

Regardless of the merit per se of the theoretical positions of Luxemburg and Lenin on the concept of self-determination of nations, it is necessary to note the irony of the concrete historical situation. In those first months of the October Revolution — the first months of 1918, when Luxemburg wrote the text — in the confusion of the revolutionary process, several national centrifugal trends gathered strength, mainly in Ukraine, the Caucasus, the Baltic region, Poland and Finland. Poland and Finland would really consolidate as independent states. But the other regions mentioned above ultimately remained part of the new Bolshevik state (renamed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922).³² On the other hand, critics of the

³¹ Luxemburg, 1918, chpt. 3, paras. 1-9, 14.

³² Although in the beginning of 1918 there were centrifugal trends and upheavals in all these regions of the former Russian Empire mentioned (Poland, Finland, Ukraine, the Baltics and the Caucasus), only Poland (on

Bolsheviks might reply that they maintained these regions in the USSR by authoritarian methods, even denying, in practice, their previous theoretical position on the self-determination of peoples.

Thus, the discussion between Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg on the self-determination of nations encompasses not only the theoretical dimension, but also the practical dimension: the question whether the Bolsheviks, in their concrete policies, would really safeguard such a right. This discussion is not included in *The Russian Revolution* because in the first months of the October Revolution, Luxemburg assumed that the Bolsheviks in this area of nationalities (unlike some other areas), had really maintained their original theoretical position of self-determination. Luxemburg considered this stance a mistake a priori, because, according to her, there is no such right (of self-determination) in the era of imperialism, when any of the positive aspects of nationalism that existed in the epoch of nascent capitalism were long since exhausted and the consequence could only be what Luxemburg and everyone was witnessing in those early months of 1918, that is, nationalist centrifugal tendencies gathering strength vis-à-vis the centralizing attempts of the new socialist government. A predictable result, she said.

Abrupt end

11/11/1918) and Finland (on 12/06/1917) achieved definitive independence. The three nations of the Baltic region (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) were independent in the interwar period, but were reincorporated into the USSR at the beginning of World War II, with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. In Ukraine and in the regions of the Caucasus mountains (such as Georgia), the independence movements lost their fight with the Bolsheviks and remained linked to the new Soviet state; in Ukraine with the Treaty of Riga on March 18, 1921 and in Georgia with the victory of the Red Army over the Menshevik government (which had declared the country's independence on May 26, 1918) on February 25, 1921.

There was an abrupt end to the interactions between Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin on the national question. Rosa Luxemburg, who had been released from prison in November 1918, participated in the founding of the KPD (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, “Communist Party of Germany”) and in the January Uprising in 1919. With the failure of the January Uprising and the ensuing persecution of communists, Rosa Luxemburg was captured and killed on 15 January 1919 by members of the *Freikorps*.

After that, the direct debate between the two on the national question was over, but Lenin referred to the topic in a kind of eulogy that he delivered in honor of Luxemburg in 1922.

Rosa Luxemburg was wrong on the question of Poland’s independence; she was wrong in 1903 in her assessment of Menshevism; she was wrong in her theory of capital accumulation; she was wrong in July 1914, when, together with Plekhanov, Vandervelde, Kautsky and others, she advocated unity between Bolsheviki and Mensheviki; she was wrong in what she wrote in prison in 1918 [about the Russian Revolution] (she corrected most of these last mistakes in late 1918 and early 1919, when she was released). But, despite her mistakes, she was (and remains for us) an eagle [...] Not only will communists around the world cultivate her memory, but her biography and works [...] will serve as useful manuals for the training of many generations of communists around the world.³³

³³ Lenin, 1960-1970, vol. 33, p. 210.

The Discussion (between Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin on the national question) Summed Up

Making a pun about the title of one of Lenin's most famous articles examined *supra* ("The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up"), let us now proceed to a review of the main and most frequent themes addressed in the interactions between Luxemburg and Lenin on the national issue. We will especially focus on those about which there was disagreement or nuance of understanding, namely, self-determination of nations, right of secession, autonomy, self-government, federation/federalism, the role of nationalism in the era of imperialism and the distinction between the nationalism of great oppressor nations and the nationalism of small oppressed nations.

Before approaching the differences between the two, we must note that, as Marxists, Luxemburg and Lenin shared many common assumptions about the phenomenon of nationalism. As mentioned earlier, both can be classified as modernists and instrumentalists. Accordingly, they did not consider nationalism a "natural," ancient phenomenon, but rather a modern phenomenon, which emerged in the nascent phase of capitalism, with its centralizing tendencies to overcome the old feudal fragmentation. Thus, both shared a lot of common ground in the theoretical aspect of the analysis of nationalism. It is the political implications and practical consequences to be extracted from this theoretical foundation that mostly divided them.

Let's look at the different topics in turn.

The **self-determination of nations** is the central concept of the discussion between Luxemburg and Lenin and the starting point of the dispute. It all began with the draft program that Lenin and the Iskra editorial board prepared to be presented at the 2nd Congress of the R.S.D.L.P. (Russian Social Democratic Labor Party) in 1903. The Iskrist's' draft program contained a paragraph about the self-determination of nations. Lenin wrote

several articles defending this thesis in 1902 and 1903. In his opinion, the description of Russia as the “prison of the peoples” was correct and the solution to the problem was to let these peoples have the right to choose whether or not they wanted to share the same “roof” with the Great Russians. Lenin’s conception of the right to self-determination coexisted with the Bolshevik centralist proposal of an amalgamation of the proletarians of the different nations toward socialism. The Bolsheviks, while respecting the nations’ right to self-determination in general, were not obliged to defend any specific separatism: they would actively support only those movements that advance the cause of socialism.

Rosa Luxemburg — who opposed the Polish independence movement and supported the union of the Polish and Russian proletariat in a common struggle — said that Lenin was “playing with fire,” that it did not make sense to include in a socialist party’s program the issue of nationalism, which, in principle, has nothing to do with socialism. Worse yet, since nationalist movements are generally led by elements of the bourgeoisie, raising the national question in the party (and in the future socialist state) would be a way of strengthening the bourgeois element in this phase of transition from capitalism to socialism.

Besides, Lenin defended the right of nations to self-determination **to the point of secession**. In other words, Lenin defended the **right to secession** in the case of those peoples who decided that they no longer wanted to live under the rule of the old state. Lenin maintained that, without this possibility as an option, the right to self-determination would be an empty phrase, without substance. Luxemburg retorted that spontaneously suggesting such a possibility was practically to encourage it. After all, during nationalist campaigns, the bourgeoisie — which usually controls these movements, the media, etc. — puts forward its own interests as if they were the interests of the “fatherland.” Accordingly, to promote the right to

secession as a real possibility is to throw gasoline into the fire already lit by the self-determination slogan.

On the question of **autonomy** there was a great deal of agreement between the two. Both defended centralism in principle. However, sheer centralism can lead to excessive bureaucratization and rigidity. Autonomy was proposed as an instrument for correcting excessive, stifling centralization. A modicum of relative (local) autonomy within a larger centralist context pleased both. After all, what need is there for the construction of a small bridge (or a local school) in Siberia to have to be determined thousands of kilometers away, in Moscow? Both Lenin and Luxemburg were fine with the idea of local autonomy to deal with local problems within the general strategies of a central plan which could be implemented at different rhythms in different locations according to diverse local conditions.

The concept of **self-government** (in Russian *samoupravlenie*; in Polish *samorząd*; in German *Selbstverwaltung*; in English also self-governance or self-rule) represents a concrete application of autonomy. In the 19th century, in the context of the Russian Empire, it included the first institutions that timidly, in the context of an absolute monarchy, sought to decentralize at least some functions of purely local interest. The concept of *samoupravlenie* (“self-government” in Russian) was used mainly to describe the great administrative novelty of Alexander II’s reforms: the *zemstvo*. Alexander II was the tsar who abolished serfdom in Russia in 1861. Although he did not accept the creation of a general parliament for the empire, in 1864 he created the *zemstvo*, which represented an elected body in the localities with limited powers to carry out certain tasks autonomously, namely, the purely local bureaucratic tasks that the central government was not interested in (or could not) take care of. The idea was to create technocratic bodies to carry out local work (construction of schools, bridges, etc.). In practice, the fact that elections were

held to choose representatives made the *zemstvo*, despite its purely bureaucratic and administrative character, become, in practice, a school of political learning, no matter how gagged and restricted politically. Note that the title of the official magazine of the *zemstvo* movement was *Samoupravlenie* (“Self-government”). Thus, in addition to the broader concept that the term self-government or self-management received in the 20th century (with much broader libertarian connotations, even within Marxism itself), in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it also encompassed the timid attempts at decentralization and self-administrative or self-managed autonomy of the *zemstvo* type. The concept of self-government was viewed positively by both Luxemburg and Lenin as compatible with democratic centralism. In other words, in their discussions, self-government was not seen as a synonym for “independence” or “separatism,” but rather as a decentralizing mechanism to take decisions of a local character, and fully compatible with centralization both within capitalism and socialism.

The concept of **Federation/Federalism** was rejected by both Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin. Within the communist movement, the concept was associated with the name of the anarchist Bakunin, who had proposed to the socialist movement, instead of Marx’s centralist model, a future “International Federation of revolutionary peoples.”³⁴ Lenin held this mostly negative view of federalism until the 1917 Revolution. The irony is that, subsequently, under pressure from the demands of

³⁴ Bakunin, in his *Revolutionary Catechism*, said that “the basic unit of all political organization in each country must be the completely autonomous commune,” that “the nation should be nothing more than a federation of autonomous provinces,” that “the province must be nothing but a free federation of autonomous communes” and that the “union of nations comprising the International Federation [...] will be the germ of the future Universal Federation of Peoples.” In *National Catechism*, Bakunin wrote: “The Revolution being localized, it will necessarily assume a federalist character.” (Bakunin, 1972, pp. 83-85, 101)

nationalities, the Soviet state would acquire a strongly federative character, balancing both centralizing and federative principles. The official name of the country was the UNION (centralizing principle) of the Soviet Socialist Republics, but many of its constituent republics were federative, including the largest one, the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic). In addition, all the constitutions of the Soviet Union (1924, 1936 and 1977) guaranteed secession rights to the constitutive republics of the USSR.

We mentioned earlier that Luxemburg and Lenin, as Marxists, can be classified as modernists and instrumentalists in terms of the theories of nationalism. Both agreed that nationalism is a modern phenomenon whose appearance is linked to nascent capitalism. In this early period of capitalism, nationalism played a positive role in stimulating centralizing tendencies to overthrow the particularism and fragmentation of feudalism. Thus, both agreed about the initial era of capitalism. However, they disagreed about the later epoch of capitalism, the epoch of imperialism (post-world crisis of 1873). Rosa Luxemburg said that in this new era, nationalism lost any positive character that it may have had in the early epochs of capitalism and fully assumed its aggressive, predatory, imperialist character. In short, she saw only the negative aspects of nationalism in the era of imperialism. Lenin, on the other hand, made his famous distinction about the nationalism of the big oppressor nations and the nationalism of the small oppressed nations and said that the latter can contain — and often does — positive aspects, which can also be used in the class struggle for socialism. Lenin paid special attention to the situation of the colonized countries which, in their struggle against the capitalist metropolises, weaken the power of the central countries' bourgeoisie, the strongest in the world and the main obstacle for a world socialist revolution. Thus, by undermining and weakening the main and strongest enemy (the bourgeoisie of the central countries), the struggle of the small oppressed nations

and colonies for liberation has the potential to propel the class struggle. Luxemburg, on the other hand, was more skeptical, and even suspicious, about the role of nationalism, even that of small oppressed nations. By emphasizing that the bourgeoisie is the predominant class in national movements, Luxemburg said that, even though at first the nationalist bourgeoisie seems to be in the same boat as the workers in their struggle against foreign domination, at some point, sooner or later, it will betray the workers' cause, either by allying itself with the foreign bourgeoisie, or by assuming full political control of the country in the event of a successful uprising against foreign oppressors.

In summary, while Luxemburg regarded purely national struggles as essentially bourgeois and therefore of no interest (and even dangerous) to the working class under imperialism, Lenin saw positive potential for the class struggle in some national movements of the oppressed and/or colonized nations.

Finally, it is important to note that, for both, there is no definitive universal answer to the problem of nationalism or a general formula that allows any national struggle to be classified as positive or negative. Both authors repeatedly indicated that each case must be seen individually and within its context in order to assess the real potential of each national claim. Both also agreed that everything must be seen from the perspective of the class struggle of the proletariat and not from any a priori national point of view.

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