

THE "reborn" Soviet weekly magazine, *New Times*, in its eighth issue of 1990, carried a four-page essay by Rosa Luxemburg (1817-1919), the co-founder of the German Communist Party. The essay titled *Dictatorship and democracy* was written from jail sometime between April, 1918, and January, 1919, since she made reference to the former month and was assassinated in the latter month. In this 5,000-word critique, Rosa Luxemburg recorded for posterity her assessment of the revolutionary tradition whose foundation she was only able to see.

While upholding the political and moral justification for the proletarian socialist revolution under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, while not underplaying the historic status of that event as the opening page of a new chapter in world history, Luxemburg nevertheless criticised the revolutionary regime's unnecessary abridgement of democracy in the Soviet Union.

The thrust of her argument as I see it was that, even if circumstances make an abridgement of democracy imperative it would be tragic to a revolution for its "leaders theoretically justify all the tactics that have been forced on them by fatal circumstances." It would even be more so for revolutionaries "to recommend those tactics to the proletariat of the world as a model of socialist tactics worthy of imitations". For such a theoretical justification makes a change of tactics difficult when the extenuating circumstances disappear. Hence theoretical justifications have a way

Rosa Luxemburg on Democracy (I)

By Edwin Madunagu

of perpetuating extenuating circumstances.

She was emphatic: "Deprivation of rights not as a definite measure, for the sake of a definite goal, but as a general long-term rule is an improvisation which lacks vitality. It is not a requisite manifestation of the dictatorship of the proletariat".

I am recalling Luxemburg's criticism at this time for four main reasons. In the first place, I want to show that even in those early days, there were criticisms of Lenin and Trotsky not only from petit-bourgeois politicians, anarchists and idealists, but also from revolutionaries whose stature was comparable to that of Lenin and Trotsky. The present calls by sections of the left for reviews of tradition are therefore neither new nor opportunistic. They have their own history. In the second place, the representation of Luxemburg's ideas is a further contribution to the debate on *Socialism in Nigeria*. Of course those who have already proclaimed socialism "dead" even, before it is born here, are free from the burden of debate. They can continue to celebrate their "victory".

In the third place, what Luxemburg had to say on the relationship between dictatorship and democracy is even more instructive today than it was 72 years ago when she wrote her piece. She appeared to be speaking to Honecker and Ceausescu even before they were born. To these "barracks social-

ists", she said: "The supremacy of the broad masses is unthinkable without a free press and the unhampered functioning of trade unions and political assemblies". In the fourth place, the present article is a contribution to the current efforts to rehabilitate this revolutionary socialist who lived and died for the working people of the world.

Writing in the *New Times*, Valery Zorkin said of Rosa Luxemburg: "It is not the circumstances of her death, but the fact that she is virtually unknown despite her fame, that is the true tragedy of Rosa Luxemburg. She was killed by her enemies, but it was her friends who committed her to oblivion and invented the thesis of the 'erroneousness of Luxemburgism' which has gone down in all the history books" — Stalinist history books, one may add. In their criminal attempts to expunge the names and works of true revolutionaries from the history books, stalinists succeeded with Luxemburg more than they did with Trotsky. And socialism is today paying dearly for this crime.

The occasion for Luxemburg's criticism of Bolshevism was the dissolution, by the Soviet regime, of the Constituent Assembly elected before the revolution and the justification given for this action by Lenin and Trotsky. She argued that even if the Constituent Assembly

was found to be 'unwieldy' and 'unrepresentative' of the new balance of forces, as Trotsky claimed, a new election ought to have followed that dissolution. Rather than do this, Trotsky claimed by way of theoretical justifications that "any Constituent Assembly was redundant". Charging that Trotsky's idea was a departure from the principles of democracy, Luxemburg said that "the historic task of the proletariat when it comes to power is to set up socialist democracy instead of bourgeois democracy and not do away with democracy altogether" which is the implication of Trotsky's formula.

Luxemburg denounced as historically false, Trotsky's declaration that, in revolutionary times any popular representation based on universal suffrage was useless. She argued that the character of even a reactionary or conservative parliament could change under revolutionary mass pressure. It stands to reason, she argued that every democratic institution should have its limits and shortcomings. But the remedy cannot be the elimination of democracy. For this elimination is "worse than the disease it is supposed to cure since it shuts off "that life-giving spring which provides the means of correcting the inherent faults of public institutions".

Luxemburg was convinced that a popularly-elected assembly based on universal suffrage was possible and necessary for the success of any

genuine socialist revolution, arguing that "socialist democracy does not come into its own only on the promised land when the foundations of the socialist economy have been established. Socialist democracy is not a Christmas present to the brave nation that gave its support to a handful of socialist dictators. Socialist democracy begins with the ending of class supremacy and starting on the road to socialist".

She was convinced, and history has borne her out, that with the denial of universal suffrage, freedom of the press and assembly and the struggle of opinion life dies in any revolutionary state.

The latter then turns into its own imitation "where the bureaucracy is the only active element". She then painted the picture with which we are painfully familiar: "With the suppression of political life in the country, life in the Soviets will peter out as well.... Public life gradually goes to sleep and only a few score party leaders rule with the indefatigable energy and boundless idealism. Under them, another score of outstanding minds manage the country's affairs, while the cream of the working class are summoned from time to time to meetings where they applaud the speeches of the leaders and vote approval of the resolutions". Writing in 1918 (and not in 1990) Luxemburg insisted that socialism could not be constructed under such a regime however committed, selfless and brilliant its leadership.

• To be concluded next Thursday

• *Contd from last Thursday*

Rosa Luxemburg on democracy (2)

By Edwin Madunagu

CONTINUING her criticism of Bolshevism (or rather, one of its policies), Rosa Luxemburg insisted that in a country where the proletariat constituted a minority and where a large fraction of this minority was unemployed or semi-employed, the Soviets (workers' assemblies) would constitute a fatally restrictive base for revolutionary governance. "It is an absurdity", she said, "to separate the electoral law from social reality and make it the fruit of utopian fantasy". As a revolutionary she, of course, admitted that a restrictive electoral law might be necessary for a transition period "from the bourgeois-capitalist to the socialist form of society". But even then, she argued, the law restricting political rights to those who work makes sense only in a society "which is economically capable of providing all who want to work the possibility of working and living a well-to-do and cultured life". This was not the case in 1918 Russia with its massive unemployment caused by economic dislocations.

The electoral law of 1918 by extending political rights only to workers restricted the rights not only of capitalists and landowners, just overthrown, but those of broad sections of the low middle classes and the working class "who have been suddenly uprooted and thrown out of their daily round". Her method of analysis was thoroughly marxist: "Any electoral law, just as all political law, should be pressed in keeping with the social and economic relations for which it has been drafted and not according to some abstract schemes of 'justice'

and such like bourgeois-democratic phraseology".

Luxemburg rejected the counterposition of revolutionary dictatorship to democracy. She defined the dictatorship of the proletariat as socialist democracy. This dictatorship according to her, "is a form of *applying* democracy and not abolishing it". Although the dictatorship of the proletariat encroaches energetically and resolutely, on the economic relations of bourgeois society "without which socialist revolution is impossible", this dictatorship should be implemented by a class "and not a leading minority on behalf of a class".

Luxemburg stood resolutely for freedom and political pluralism. Hence, she was opposed to the one-party system: "Freedom only for the supporters of government, only for the members of one party — no matter how big its membership — is no freedom. Freedom is always freedom for dissenters. That is not said out of a fanatical sense of justice, but because that is the essence on which depends the reviving, healing and purifying effect of poli-

nute that freedom becomes a privilege". She warned that a socialist revolution which abridges political freedom is doomed for, by so doing, "it shuts off its own sources of spiritual wealth and progress".

Luxemburg attacked, even in 1918, what has now become known as *command-socialism*. And in doing so, she re-established the principles of dialectics in revolutionary politics: "The practical

realisation of socialism as an economic, social and legal system is far more than an aggregate of ready-made instructions which only wait to be applied. The practical realisation of socialism is veiled in the midst of the future". She insisted — drawing examples from the methods sometimes adopted by Bolshevik leaders themselves — that revolutionaries must feel their way at every step, search and experiment, try out one method and then another. If this is an imperative, she argued, "it is clear that the very nature of socialism precludes the possibility of realisation through decrees".

Declaring that socialism is a mass movement, Luxemburg warned: "Unless the entire mass of the people is engaged, socialism will be introduced by a decree granted to them by a score of intellectuals sitting round a green table". The result will be the creation not of a socialist society, but of a bourgeois society, tuend upside down or in reverse. Then a new revolution will become both necessary and inevitable!

Luxemburg rejected the "omnipotence" of the party. It is wrong, she insisted, to imagine that the revolutionary party has a "recipe in its pocket for socialism which only needs the energetic implementation" by party leaders. She was convinced that only active and conscious masses are capable of building a new society: "Control by the people is absolutely necessary, otherwise experience will be shared

only within a circle of officials of the new government, and corruption will be inevitable".

Her logic was that any sustained rule by a "state of siege" leads to arbitrary rule and an arbitrary rule leads to corruption — in political, moral and material terms. Since corruption cannot be removed by decrees, but by conscious mass action a "state of siege" regime, the Ceausescu-type, has no means of internal self-correction. It can only be destroyed.

Concluding the essay, Rosa Luxemburg declared: "Socialism calls for a genuine spiritual transformation of the masses who have been degenerating for centuries under bourgeois class domination. Social and not egoistic instinct are needed; mass initiative instead of inertness; idealism that helps people overcome all sufferings and so on and so forth. Decrees, dictatorial power of factory overseers, severe punishment and terror are all palliatives. The dominance of terror has a demoralising effect. The only road to revival is through the school of public life, unlimited democracy and public opinion".

These are mere extracts from Luxemburg's essay published in *New Times*. The essay itself was extracted from a larger work. Although, I doubt if the intention for publishing the essay in the *New Times* was a revolutionary one, I am convinced that all those who do not see the possibility of human freedom under capitalism will sooner or later include the life and works of this controversial woman as sources for solution. A first-class marxist

theoretician, a leading economist, a brilliant polemicist and a merciless critic, she was "firmly convinced that dissent was precisely what was required in the search for truth". No wonder Lenin valued her immensely, despite their often violent disagreements. She was "one of the most exuberant sources of free-thinking in the communist movement".

Rosa Luxemburg's opposition to ideological and political rigidities in the construction of socialism is rooted in her philosophical beliefs, conclusions from her theoretical work as well as her practical revolutionary experience. First, she identified socialism with a realm of freedom much higher than bourgeois democracy. Socialism would cease to have any attraction for her, as well as for me, if it ceases to be. Secondly, she believed that socialism can be counterposed to capitalism only to the extent that the former is a *process of negating* the latter, not its complete negation. The complete negation of capitalism is communism.

Precisely, because socialism is a transition the socialist regime cannot be stable. Hence, it cannot be governed by rigid laws. Pursing this line of thought, in her economic research Rosa Luxemburg came to the conclusion that there could be nothing like *economic laws of socialism*. Her reason? The socialist regime would be too unstable to create a set of laws. Only the communist regime of the future would create laws. She wrote this about 1910. Fourteen years later, in 1924, Leon Trotsky came to the same conclusion with regards to the *proletarian culture*.

• *Concluded.*