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FRANK JACOB

# ROSA LUXEMBURG

Living and Thinking the Revolution



BÜCHNER

Rosa Luxemburg

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Frank Jacob

# Rosa Luxemburg

Living and Thinking the Revolution



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Frank Jacob  
Rosa Luxemburg: Living and Thinking the Revolution

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## Introduction

Rosa Luxemburg indeed counts as one of »the most interesting personalities of the 20th century.«<sup>1</sup> The Jewish woman from Poland was not only »a brilliant and luminous individual,«<sup>2</sup> whom Franz Mehring (1846–1919) called »the most brilliant follower of Marx,«<sup>3</sup> but she was also without any doubt »one of Marxism’s most articulate and thorough theorists,«<sup>4</sup> although Luxemburg was not a dogmatic Marxist in the negative sense of the term at all. She had a »charismatic personality«<sup>5</sup> and seemed to be more politically interested than most of the women and men of her time.<sup>6</sup> Her »sparkling mind always sought contradiction,«<sup>7</sup> a fact that led the journalist, polemicist, and revolu-

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- 1 Annelies Laschitzka: *Im Lebensrausch, trotz alledem. Rosa Luxemburg – Eine Biographie*, 2nd edition, Berlin 1996, p. 9.
  - 2 Giuseppe Berti: *Gli scritti politici di Rosa Luxemburg*, in: *Studi Storici* 9/1968, no. 1, pp. 225–232, here p. 225.
  - 3 Gilbert Badia: *Rosa Luxemburg, Marx y el problema de las alianzas. En torno al problema de la estrategia revolucionaria*, in: *Materiales* 3/1977, pp. 166–176, here p. 166.
  - 4 Edward B. McLean: *Rosa Luxemburg – Radical Socialist. A Reappraisal on the Occasion of Her Death in 1919*, in: *Il Politico* 34/1969, no. 1, pp. 28–45, here p. 28.
  - 5 Ernst Piper: *Rosa Luxemburg. Ein Leben*, 2nd edition, Munich 2019, p. 9.
  - 6 John P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg. The Biography*, London/New York 2019, p. 55.
  - 7 Jörn Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn. Rosa Luxemburg*, in: Jörn Schütrumpf (Ed.): *Rosa Luxemburg oder: Der Preis der Freiheit*, 3rd edition, Berlin 2018, pp. 11–100, here p. 100.

tionary<sup>8</sup> constantly into confrontation with others who did not share her thoughts, who might even have felt embarrassed by them. Since Luxemburg was neither a pure theorist like Marx nor a party leader like August Bebel (1840–1913) or Vladimir I. Lenin (1870–1924)<sup>9</sup> but mainly worked as a journalist and lecturer, we can also understand her impact to be one of an »operative intellectual«<sup>10</sup> who commented on daily events. In her works, nevertheless, Luxemburg also discussed revolution theory and therefore combined revolutionary thinking and revolutionary practice.<sup>11</sup> All in all, it is therefore no surprise that »the contradictions surrounding Rosa Luxemburg are extreme,«<sup>12</sup> especially since Luxemburg early on evoked emotions of all kinds as those who met her could not remain indifferent toward her.<sup>13</sup> Many of Luxemburg's works also have entered world literature as those of a »brilliant polemicist«<sup>14</sup> whose talent has remained almost unmatched until today.

Luxemburg, this »fery woman of Jewish-Polish origin, small and slender, slightly lame from a childhood disease,« as German-British historian Francis L. Carsten (1911–1998) remarked, was »an orator who could sway the masses, a professional revolutionary who seemed to belong to the Russian world from which she came rather

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8 Gilbert Badia, *Rosa Luxemburg. Journaliste, polemiste, revolutionnaire*, Paris 1975; Volker Caysa discussed Luxemburg as a philosopher: Volker Caysa: *Rosa Luxemburg – die Philosophin*, Leipzig 2017.

9 Michael Brie: *Rosa Luxemburg neu entdecken. Ein hellblaues Bändchen zu »Freiheit für den Feind! Demokratie und Sozialismus«*, Hamburg 2019, p. 10.

10 Georg Fülberth: *Friedrich Engels*, Cologne 2018, p. 12.

11 Dick Howard: *The Marxian Legacy. The Search for the New Left*, London 2019 [1977], p. 24.

12 Helen Scott: Introduction. Rosa Luxemburg, in: Helen Scott (Ed.): *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg. Reform or Revolution & The Mass Strike*, Chicago, IL 2007, pp. 1–36, here p. 1.

13 Piper: *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 9.

14 Schürumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 26.

than to modern Germany.«<sup>15</sup> Luxemburg downplayed mockery about her physique with self-irony, especially since she intellectually overtowered most of those who tried to get to her with comments about her body.<sup>16</sup> Her life, nevertheless, was determined by her search for a higher cause, as she wanted to live a politically useful life, a life that would make a difference to those who would follow in her footsteps.<sup>17</sup> Although the socialist revolutionary tried to hide most of her private life from the public – her intimate relationship with Paul Levi (1883–1930) was unknown to the wider public before 1983<sup>18</sup> –, her life was driven by, as German historian and Luxemburg expert Jörn Schütrumpf worded it, »an insatiable greed for life.«<sup>19</sup> She was always looking for the positive things and was »bursting with ideas.«<sup>20</sup> In a letter to Sophie Liebknecht (1884–1964) written from prison in early January 1917, Luxemburg emphasizes her love for life beyond her political agitation when she writes: »Nothing human or feminine is alien or indifferent to me.«<sup>21</sup> Luxemburg's life was nevertheless characterized by hardships – not only her four times in prison in 1904, 1906, 1915, and between 1916 and 1918<sup>22</sup> – because she, as the late grand dame of Luxemburg research Annelies Laschitzka (1934–2018) highlighted, »fought for a better world« that was supposed to »be based on

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15 Francis L. Carsten: Rosa Luxemburg, Freedom and Revolution, in: Francis L. Carsten: Essays in German History, London 2003, pp. 271–28, here p. 271.

16 Schütrumpf: Zwischen Liebe und Zorn, p. 27.

17 Volker Caysa: Rosa Luxemburg – das Leben als Werk, in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 11–36, here p. 14.

18 Schütrumpf: Zwischen Liebe und Zorn, p. 28.

19 Ibid., p. 26.

20 Laschitzka: Im Lebensrausch, p. 9. Also see Caysa: Leben als Werk, p. 14.

21 Brief an Sophie Liebknecht, Wronke, Anfang Januar 1917, S. 17–19. 60 hier S. 17

22 Peter Engelhard: Die Ökonomen der SPD. Eine Geschichte sozialdemokratischer Wirtschaftspolitik in 45 Porträts, Bielefeld 2014, p. 27.

unlimited freedom and democracy«<sup>23</sup> and therefore became a target of anti-democratic forces.

It is consequently not surprising that Luxemburg sometimes tried to escape into solitude, and her life also had some irascible or melancholic episodes.<sup>24</sup> Her works were numerous and dealt with all the important issues of her time: reform and revolution, democracy and dictatorship, nationalism and internationalism, as well as capitalism and socialism.<sup>25</sup> Luxemburg discussed the problems of her time, i. e. politics and economic questions alike, and even kept track of the Russian Revolutions in 1917 while she was in prison. Regardless of the diversity of her writings, her »thoughts, actions and hopes were [always] directed towards the proletarian world revolution,«<sup>26</sup> and it is not surprising that, over the years, she advanced to become »the most prominent leader of the left wing of the German Social Democratic Party«<sup>27</sup> before she left it to act as one of the founding figures of the German Communist Party. Eventually, her murder made Luxemburg »both a heroine and a martyr of the socialist workers' movement.«<sup>28</sup> While her murder is one aspect of her revolutionary life that »seems to stand out,« Luxemburg's »disputes with Lenin in which she appears to represent democracy against Russian Communism«<sup>29</sup> are another one.

Depictions of Rosa Luxemburg in fiction and biographical works are therefore often based on a selective choice of perspective, depending on the identity and the role the Polish revolutionary was supposed

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23 Laschitza: *Im Lebensrausch*, p. 9.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 10. Also see Letter to Sophie Liebknecht, Leipzig, July 7, 1916, in: Rosa Luxemburg: *Briefe aus dem Gefängnis*, 20th edition, Berlin 2019, p. 11.

25 Laschitza: *Im Lebensrausch*, p. 11.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 568.

27 Jason Schulman: Introduction. Reintroducing Red Rosa, in: Jason Schulman (Ed.): *Rosa Luxemburg. Her Life and Legacy*, New York 2013, pp. 1–10, here p. 1.

28 *Ibid.* On her murder see: Annelies Laschitza: *Rosa Luxemburgs Tod. Dokumente und Kommentare*, Leipzig 2010.

29 John P. Nettl: *Rosa Luxemburg*, vol. 1, London 1966, p. 1.

to have played due to her life and works.<sup>30</sup> One major public image of Luxemburg has been based on Margarethe von Trotta's film *Rosa Luxemburg* (1986), which, however, shows an »introspective woman [...] only reluctantly a revolutionary«<sup>31</sup> and thereby offers nothing more than a somehow distorted view on Luxemburg's revolutionary life and actions. With regard to the studies about the Polish woman, German social democrat and later communist party member, one can say, in accordance with the French Marxist Emile Bottigelli's (1910–1975) evaluation, that most of them »are tainted with bias.«<sup>32</sup> In particular, »Marxist evaluations of Rosa Luxemburg,« as Korean historian Jie-Hyun Lim emphasized, »have ranged from ardent advocacy to excommunication.«<sup>33</sup> These studies, Lim continues in his evaluation, »have been more ideological than historical, more political than ideological, and, indeed, more sectional than political.«<sup>34</sup> Jörn Schütrumpf explains with regard to these existent falsifications about Luxemburg, which today sometimes remain unchallenged by the international Left as well, that the political Left has been rather unsuccessful in finding integrative figures, but Luxemburg, Ernesto »Che« Guevara (1928–1967) and Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) could be such figures, as all three of them represent the »unity of word and action« as well

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30 Laschitzka: *Im Lebensrausch*, p. 10. For a discussion of one of Luxemburg's images in German literature see: Ute Karlavaris-Bremer: *Rosa Luxemburg in Alfred Döblins Romantetralogie »November 1918«*, in: Marijam Bobinac et al. (Eds.): *Tendenzen im Geschichtsdrama und Geschichtsroman des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Zagreb 2004, pp. 133–143. For a broader analysis see: Julia Killet: *Fiktion und Wirklichkeit. Die Darstellung Rosa Luxemburgs in der biographischen und literarischen Prosa*, Hamburg 2020.

31 Scott: Introduction, p. 1.

32 Emile Bottigelli: *Réflexions sur un livre. Rosa Luxemburg. Mythe et réalité*, in: *Le Mouvement Social* 95/1976, pp. 147–152, here p. 148.

33 Jie-Hyun Lim: *Rosa Luxemburg on the Dialectics of Proletarian Internationalism and Social Patriotism*, in: *Science & Society* 59/1995–1996, no. 4, pp. 498–530, here p. 498.

34 *Ibid.*

as »independent thinking.«<sup>35</sup> The perversion of socialism in the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century paralyzed the Left, but Luxemburg seems to represent one of those intellectuals who would not have accepted these horrors, especially since she was among the first who criticized the moral corruption of the Russian Revolution by Lenin and the Bolsheviks in October 1917.<sup>36</sup> The intellectual Luxemburg, who »pursued equality in freedom and solidarity,«<sup>37</sup> however, did not live long enough to fully react to the rise of Leninism, and later Stalinism.

Rosa Luxemburg's life spanned important events within the time of the German Empire, including its fall in 1918, and throughout the years of her activities, she would not only observe but also participate in, and even drive forward, the changes of the decades in question.<sup>38</sup> Her texts in which she reacted to the specific contexts of her time,<sup>39</sup> however, have not lost their actuality and power with regard to many issues we still struggle with in the 21st century; her thoughts about revolutionary practice in particular are still able to address current events.<sup>40</sup> Luxemburg's texts at the same time possess so much power because they follow a clear dictum instead of seeking a diplomatic approach. Revolution is for Luxemburg a *conditio sine qua non*, and her critical consciousness embarrassed those German social democrats who had forgotten about the Marxian legacy and the revolutionary

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35 Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 12.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14. For a detailed discussion of this moral corruption see: Frank Jacob: 1917. Die korrumpierte Revolution, Marburg 2020.

37 Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 16.

38 Anne-Kathrin Krug/Jakob Graf: Zur Aktualität der Organisationstheorie von Luxemburg und Gramsci. Zwischen emanzipatorischer Theoriebildung und ahistorischer Bezugnahme, in: *PROKLA* 171/2013, pp. 239–259, here p. 240.

39 Paul Mattick: Rosa Luxemburg. Un examen retrospectivo, in: *Materiales* 3/1977, pp. 84–105, here p. 85.

40 Dietmar Dath: Eine sehr große Ausnahme, in: Rosa Luxemburg, *Friedensutopien und Hundepolitik: Schriften und Reden*, 2nd edition, Stuttgart 2018, pp. 104–108, here pp. 105–106.

masses. For many, Luxemburg was only annoying at first, but later she encountered a lot of hatred from her party colleagues because she put her finger into wounds that had been left open due to a lack of social democratic ambition to stick to the revolutionary aspects of socialism.<sup>41</sup> It was consequently not surprising that Luxemburg got more and more isolated in the Social Democratic Party, whose members did not protect the revolutionary in 1919 when the »murderous hordes of German militarism«<sup>42</sup> killed her in cold blood.

The violent death of Rosa Luxemburg would be recalled in the eventual split of the German workers' movement and the international Left alike.<sup>43</sup> The radical Left in Germany would accuse the Social Democratic Party of betraying the revolution and use Luxemburg's memory as a way to emphasize this, while the conservative forces, in contrast to the image of the martyr, continued to paint a picture of »Bloody Rosa,« a radical whose ideas would also have led to a Leftist form of totalitarianism.<sup>44</sup> It is historically ironic that these totalitarian forces demolished the image and credibility of Rosa Luxemburg while using her as a silent saint of revolution. In his letter »On Some Ques-

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41 Ibid., p. 107.

42 Ibid., p. 108.

43 William A. Pelz: Another Luxemburgism is Possible: Reflections on Rosa and the Radical Socialist Project, Paper Presented to the International Rosa Luxemburg Conference, 1–2 April 2007 in Tokyo (Japan). Online: <http://www.internationale-rosa-luxemburg-gesellschaft.de/Downloads/16-Pelz.pdf>, p. 2. Also see Helmut Peitsch: Rosa Luxemburg in der deutschen Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts, in: *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 65/2013, no. 2, pp. 152–172, here p. 154 for the ambivalent perspectives by authors, who dealt with Luxemburg's death since 1919.

44 Alexander Gallus: Die vergessene Revolution von 1918/19 – Erinnerung und Deutung im Wandel, in: Alexander Gallus (Ed.), *Die vergessene Revolution von 1918/19*, Göttingen 2010, pp. 14–38, here p. 17; Peitsch: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 156. Also see: Berta Lask: Rosa Luxemburgs Briefe aus dem Gefängnis, in: *dies., Unsere Aufgabe an der Menschheit*, Berlin 1923, pp. 55–59, here p. 58, cited in *ibid.*, p. 157.

tions Concerning the History of Bolshevism« (1931),<sup>45</sup> Joseph Stalin (1878–1953) created the myth of »Luxemburgism,«<sup>46</sup> which he considered »a type of counterrevolutionary Menshevism.«<sup>47</sup> Although some anti-Stalinists, including Leon Trotsky (1879–1940)<sup>48</sup> and Paul Frölich (1884–1953),<sup>49</sup> had tried to counter this interpretation of Luxemburg's works, the anti-Luxemburgian course of interpretation continued, especially in the German Democratic Republic, where her works were considered to be based on a system of failures and mistakes,<sup>50</sup> something Lenin had already pointed out some years before. Regardless of the time that passed and the numerous works that dealt with Luxemburg's life and work, the late US historian William A. Pelz (1951–2017) is correct in his evaluation that »much remains to be done to restore Rosa Luxemburg to her rightful place as an original thinker and an ethical revolutionary.«<sup>51</sup>

That Luxemburg's legacy is still fought over in the 21st century<sup>52</sup> was obvious during a debate about a memorial for her in Berlin in 2002. German historian Heinrich August Winkler argued that the German Left only wanted to secure its »cultural hegemony« by dis-

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45 Joseph V. Stalin, Works, Moscow 1955, vol. 13, p. 102, cited in Pelz: Another Luxemburgism, p. 2. Originally, the letter was published in *Proletarskaia Revoliutsiia*.

46 Holger Politt: Luxemburgismus. Geschichte einer politischen Verfolgung, in: Luxemburg 3/2018, pp. 142–147.

47 Pelz: Another Luxemburgism, p. 2.

48 Leon Trotsky: Hands Off Rosa Luxemburg! in: The Militant (New York), August 6 and 13, 1932.

49 Paul Frölich: Rosa Luxemburg. Gedanke und Tat, Berlin 1990. On Frölich's life and works see: Riccardo Altieri: Paul Frölich, American Exile, and Communist Discourse About the Russian Revolution, in: American Communist History 17/2018, no. 2, pp. 220–231.

50 Fred Oelßner: Rosa Luxemburg. Eine kritische biographische Skizze, Berlin 1951, p. 7.

51 Pelz: Another Luxemburgism, p. 4.

52 Hartfrid Krause: Rosa Luxemburg, Paul Levi und die USPD. Münster 2019, p. 11.



playing Luxemburg as a representation of »communism with a human face.«<sup>53</sup> His arguments still emphasized the split between the Social Democratic and the Socialist Left traditions in contemporary Germany, while Andreas Wirsching, Director of the Center for Contemporary History (Institut für Zeitgeschichte), simply declared that Luxemburg must be considered a »totalitarian theorist at heart.«<sup>54</sup> It is obvious that although Luxemburg's intellectual works are classics of socialism for some,<sup>55</sup> they remain for others the products of a »most extreme thinker.«<sup>56</sup> Whether the negative views are related to an illiteracy with regard to Luxemburg's writings or are just an expression of a political interpretation of history depends on the case, but this short survey of different opinions about Luxemburg in contemporary Germany shows that the struggle over her legacy has not ended yet.

One idea, expressed by the famous Hitler biographer Joachim C. Fest in 1971, is, however, completely wrong. Fest argued that »Luxemburg was ultimately no revolutionary.«<sup>57</sup> Until today, Luxemburg's theoretical reflections about revolutions have only been discussed in relation to specific events or issues, i. e. the debate with Eduard Bernstein (1850–1932), the Russian Revolution in 1905, the Russian Revolutions of 1917, and the German Revolution of 1918/19, yet her

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53 Heinrich August Winkler: Nachdenken über Rosa L.: Ein Denkmal als Kampf um die kulturelle Hegemonie, in: Heinrich August Winkler et al. (Eds.): Arbeit am Mythos Rosa Luxemburg: Braucht Berlin ein neues Denkmal für die ermordete Revolutionärin? (Reihe Gesprächskreis Geschichte, 44), Bonn 2002, pp. 9–15, here pp. 9 and 15.

54 Cited in Peitsch: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 152. For a more nuanced analysis see: Ottokar Luban: Rosa Luxemburg. Demokratische Sozialistin oder Bolschewistin? in: Jahrbuch für historische Kommunismusforschung 7–8/2000–2001, pp. 409–420.

55 Helga Grebing: Rosa Luxemburg, in: Walter Euchner (Ed.): Klassiker des Sozialismus II, Munich 1991, pp. 58–71.

56 Engelhard: Die Ökonomen der SPD, p. 27.

57 Joachim Fest, Die Dingsda, in: Der Spiegel 25/1971, no. 16, pp. 158–159. here p. 159, cited in Peitsch: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 155.

theoretical reflections as they emerged and developed during her lifetime have not yet been discussed in detail.<sup>58</sup> German writer Dietmar Dath's characterization of Luxemburg as a »professional revolutionary«<sup>59</sup> does not fully align with her own theoretical reflections, as the famous revolutionary did not consider revolutionism to be a profession but rather an organic process people should try to help succeed by their own actions. She definitely was not only a »thinker of the revolution,«<sup>60</sup> but actively tried to participate in it, whether in 1905–1906 or 1917–1919. Her thoughts were consequently also based on practical experiences, combining revolutionary theory and practice.<sup>61</sup> It is also not deniable that Luxemburg referred to Marx and his works when thinking about revolution,<sup>62</sup> yet she also read her theoretical predecessors' work quite critically and was, as mentioned before, not a Marxist in the doctrinal sense of the term. However, she »was fully Marxist, attempting to define action by theory and theory by experience.«<sup>63</sup> What value could Marx's writings have if they were not applied in practice, even if the actual experience proved the theories wrong? For Luxemburg, »socialism was not a theory to be acquired and act as though according to the Ten Commandments.«<sup>64</sup> Therefore, as the Italian anti-fascist intellectual Piero Gobetti (1901–1926) worded it, Luxemburg »wanted to be, and knew she was, a real revolutionary,

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58 Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 96.

59 Dietmar Dath: *Rosa Luxemburg*, 2nd edition, Berlin 2019, p. 19.

60 Alexandra Kemmerer: *Rosakind. Luxemburg, die Revolution und die Bildpolitik*, in: *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* 10/2016, no. 3, pp. 44–52, here p. 52.

61 Georg Lukács: *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, Neuwied/Berlin 1970, p. 117.

62 Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel: *Vorwort*, in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): *Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes*, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, p. 7.

63 Krause: *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 11.

64 Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 62.

above human things like homeland, family, private life.«<sup>65</sup> It was therefore her life and hope for »[r]evolution [that] energized Rosa's theory and practice throughout her life. A momentous revolutionary moment was about to unfold, and she was not going to be barred from it, even if she was still behind physical bars.«<sup>66</sup>

What makes Luxemburg's revolutionary ideas important is the fact that she always, in theory and practice alike, »condemned all forms of ›Jacobinism‹ or ›Blanquism,‹ that is, all forms of revolutionary elitism,«<sup>67</sup> which is why her »commitment to democratic politics stands as her most pronounced intellectual legacy.«<sup>68</sup> Her principles made clear that she could not and would not accept any attempt to usurp power:

1. a steadfast belief in democracy;
2. complete faith in the common people (the masses);
3. dedication to internationalism in word and deed;
4. a commitment to a democratic revolutionary party; and
5. the unshakable practice of humanism.<sup>69</sup>

According to her beliefs, the masses needed to be involved and in control of the revolutionary process all the time, because without their involvement there could be no freedom and equality – the ultimate aims of each revolutionary process.

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65 Piero Gobetti: *On Liberal Revolution*, edited by Nadia Urbinati, transl. by William McCuaig, New Haven, CT 2000, p. 46.

66 Dana Mills: *Rosa Luxemburg*, London 2020, p. 136.

67 Andrzej Walicki: *Rosa Luxemburg and the Question of Nationalism in Polish Marxism (1893–1914)*, in: *The Slavonic and East European Review* 61/1983, no. 4, pp. 565–582, here p. 568.

68 Eric D. Weitz: »Rosa Luxemburg Belongs to Us!« *German Communism and the Luxemburg Legacy*, in: *Central European History* 27/1994, no. 1, pp. 27–64, here p. 27.

69 Pelz: *Another Luxemburgism*, p. 4.

These considerations are directly and dichotomously in opposition to Leninist revolution theory.<sup>70</sup> Almost like her contemporary Emma Goldman (1869–1940),<sup>71</sup> the Polish socialist revolutionary opposed not only Lenin’s theoretical claims with regard to a revolutionary avant-garde party but also the idea that a revolution needed to lead into a new hierarchical rule of a minority, as revolutionary as the latter might have been.<sup>72</sup> Luxemburg also rejected the assumption that revolutions could be planned or scheduled.<sup>73</sup> She instead identified the masses as the true revolutionary force that should not be abused: »Revolutionary activity issues from an ultracentralistically organized collective will which, in accordance with a plan worked out in advance, in every detail, turns the broad masses of the people into its disciplined tools, to which the strength of the center is mechanically transferable.«<sup>74</sup> The contrast with Lenin was consequently existent early on, especially with regard to the theoretical interpretation of a revolution per se. The German philosopher Ernst Vollrath (1932–2003) tried to explain Luxemburg’s concept of revolution as follows:

What Rosa Luxemburg calls revolution is an activity of those whom the sheer facts of proletarian life – in other words, economic reasons – keep from participating actively in the determination of their fate. It is the activity in which they set out to win this participation. Such a view of

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70 Ernst Vollrath: Rosa Luxemburg’s Theory of Revolution, in: *Social Research* 40/1973, no. 1, pp. 83–109, here p. 88. Also see Ottokar Luban: *Rosa Luxemburgs Demokratiekonzept. Ihre Kritik an Lenin und ihr politisches Wirken, 1913–1919*, Leipzig 2009.

71 Frank Jacob: *Emma Goldman and the Russian Revolution. From Admiration to Frustration*, Berlin 2020.

72 Johannes Wörle: *Die Avantgarde als Keimzelle der Revolution. Vladimir I. Lenin*, in: Alexander Straßner (Ed.): *Sozialrevolutionärer Terrorismus. Theorie, Ideologie, Fallbeispiele, Zukunftsszenarien*, Wiesbaden 2009, pp. 77–85.

73 Rosa Luxemburg: *Gesammelte Werke*, Berlin 1970– (henceforth GW), vol. 1, p. 141.

74 Vollrath: *Rosa Luxemburg’s Theory of Revolution*, pp. 88–89.

the nature of revolution excludes the assumption that revolution is a means to quite another end. And it is equally out of the question, then, to see the essence of revolution in violence or in a pure shift of power according to plans laid by a centralized collective will.<sup>75</sup>

In addition, one would have to add here that it is not solely the masses' participation but also the end of the existent »determination of their fate,« i.e. the capitalist system of exploitation, which should be overcome and transformed into a truly free and equal, namely socialist society. This transformation can only be achieved through 1) the awareness of the masses about their own revolutionary potential and 2) a democratic revolutionary process that is neither led nor corrupted by a minority, but remains a process in which the people decide as a democratic union about their future independently and not controlled by economic means and the hierarchies the former usually create in a capitalist system.

These considerations are often quite unknown, especially by a broader public to whose members Luxemburg's name might sound familiar but whose »associations are vague – German, Jewish, and revolutionary; that is as far as it goes.«<sup>76</sup> Of course, Luxemburg's ideas about revolution and socialism had quite some impact on important thinkers of the 20th century, including Georg Lukács (1885–1971)<sup>77</sup> and Hannah Arendt (1906–1975)<sup>78</sup>, and since the 1960s they have also stimulated timely discourses about revolutions, mass strikes, as well

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75 Ibid, p. 93.

76 Nettl: Rosa Luxemburg [1966], p. 1.

77 Antonia Opitz: Georg Lukács und Rosa Luxemburg, in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 238–247.

78 Francis Moreault: Hannah Arendt, lectrice de Rosa Luxemburg, in: Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique 34/2001, no. 2, pp. 227–247, here p. 227. Also see Werner Abel: Hannah Arendt über Rosa Luxemburg, in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes, 2nd revised edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 248–272.

as the role of the masses for political emancipation.<sup>79</sup> In the 1970s, the »problem of a just relocation of the thought of the Polish revolutionary in the theoretical and fighting heritage of the international communist movement has arisen in the last ten years with increasing urgency,<sup>80</sup> and not only in Italy, as historian Aldo Agosti confirmed. In addition, it was not only scholars but also university students who returned to Luxemburg, especially since her opposition to Lenin had stimulated interest in her writings.<sup>81</sup> Although the American philosopher Dick Howard declared in 1976 that »it has become impossible to share the optimism of Rosa Luxemburg,<sup>82</sup> the works of the Polish revolutionary still tend to attract reflections and discussions even today.<sup>83</sup> She has not been forgotten,<sup>84</sup> nor have her thoughts lost their momentum when applied to critical reflections about a possible better future.<sup>85</sup> The American scholar Helen Scott highlighted this actuality of Luxemburg's writings, describing them as »deeply compassionate, and above all, thoroughly committed to socialist revolution.<sup>86</sup>

Neither Luxemburg's commemoration nor her impact could be fully suppressed during the 20th century, and even if her ideas are still often represented in a misleading way, she continues to question existent rules and to move people, to make them conceptualize their own

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79 Berti: *Gli scritti politici*, p. 225.

80 Aldo Agosti: *Rosa Luxemburg e il pensiero marxista*, in: *Studi Storici* 14/1973, no. 4, pp. 953–959, here p. 953.

81 Gilbert Badia: *La place de Rosa Luxemburg dans le mouvement socialiste*, in: *Revue Historique* 252/1974, no. 1, pp. 107–118, here pp. 107–108.

82 Dick Howard: *Rosa Luxemburg. Théorie et pratique*, in: *Esprit*, Nouvelle série 454/1976, no. 2, pp. 263–285, here p. 263.

83 Narihiko Ito/Annelies Laschitz/Ottokar Luban (Eds.): *Rosa Luxemburg im internationalen Diskurs. Internationale Rosa-Luxemburg-Gesellschaft in Chicago, Tampere, Berlin, und Zürich (1998–2000)*, Berlin 2002.

84 Brie: *Rosa Luxemburg neu entdecken*, p. 8.

85 Dath: *Ausnahme*, p. 105; Dath: *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 8.

86 Scott: *Introduction*, p. 2.

revolutionary power.<sup>87</sup> Consequently, one can agree with Volker Caysa's evaluation that Luxemburg's »life, thoughts, work and impact« are really modern in a threefold sense: 1) with regard to globalization theory, which is discussed in her accumulation theory, 2) with regard to public theory, in which Luxemburg's discussions about the organization of the masses and the party are echoed, and 3) with regard to questions of individual ways of life.<sup>88</sup> In addition to these aspects, Luxemburg's ideas about revolution are also important today, as they point the way to possibilities for a resistance of the masses against capitalist exploitation, toward a democratic socialism.

How Rosa Luxemburg combined theoretical thinking and actual practice with regard to revolution during her eventful life shall be taken into closer consideration in the following analysis. Her debates with Bernstein and Lenin will be followed by chapters about her theoretical development during the Russian Revolution of 1905, her fight against imperialism in the years between 1907 and 1914, as well as her views about the Russian Revolutions of 1917. In all these chapters, her development as a revolutionary will be outlined by analyzing some of her key texts while considering her own revolutionary actions at the same time. Eventually, her role and violent end during the German Revolution will be discussed, before her revolutionary legacy shall be elaborated in some detail to conclude the present book and to provide an evaluation of her importance to revolutionary attempts of the future.

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87 Michael Brie: Rosa Luxemburgs Symphonie zur Russischen Revolution, in: Standpunkte 10 /2011, pp. 1–6, here p. 1; Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 8.

88 Caysa: Leben als Werk, p. 11.





## The Theoretical Debates with Bernstein and Lenin

Rosa Luxemburg was the fifth child of a »Jewish middle-class family«<sup>1</sup> and her family moved from the small Polish town of Zamość – 240 kilometers southeast of Warsaw – to the later capital of independent Poland in 1872/73, where her father had to deal with inherited business issues.<sup>2</sup> Adam, Luxemburg's grandfather, had speculated with trading for the Russian Army, but in 1863/64, due to the January Uprising, he lost his money and fled the country. His sons, including Edward, Luxemburg's father, who is usually referred to as a timber merchant, continued his business.<sup>3</sup> Although Luxemburg's life would often be related to the history of the German Empire, especially its end, her origin as an intellectual can be traced back to Poland when it still belonged to the Tsarist Empire, a fact that, in a way, politicized the young revolutionary early on.

Her »obvious academic excellence« was no secret to her parents either, who supported Luxemburg's education, yet Helen Scott's claim that the family moved to Warsaw »at least in part to gain access to better educational opportunities for the children«<sup>4</sup> can neither be confirmed nor denied here. In fact, while the move did allow Luxemburg to gain from a better educational infrastructure, it also allowed

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1 Carsten: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 271. Also see Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 13.

2 Krzysztof Pilawski/Holger Politt (Eds.): Rosa Luxemburg. Spurensuche – Dokumente und Zeugnisse einer jüdischen Familie, Hamburg 2020, pp. 69–79.

3 Nettel: Rosa Luxemburg [1966], pp. 41–62.

4 Scott: Introduction, p. 3.

her to get in contact with radical political ideas. In June 1880 she was accepted at a high school for girls in Warsaw, where she was a bright student. At the age of 16 she joined the political group »Proletariat,« an illegal socialist circle that imported forbidden works into the Russian Empire, where it translated and circulated them. When the activities of the group became known, Luxemburg, who had recently finished her school education, was forced to leave the country and was smuggled out. She went to Zurich in Switzerland, where the Polish revolutionary would later begin to study national economy and public law.<sup>5</sup>

Due to these decisions, she not only left behind her childhood in Warsaw, where she had dreamed of a yet unknown but intriguing future,<sup>6</sup> but also her family, whose problems and sorrows reached the young academic only in a relatively blurred form.<sup>7</sup> The young revolutionary instead dived even deeper into the political circles of her new Swiss environment, where other revolutionaries from Eastern Europe had found shelter as well,<sup>8</sup> while she continued her education. In 1897, her supervisor Prof. Julius Wolf, who was not a Marxist at all but instead was quite interested in the young talent, accepted her doctoral thesis – »The Industrial Development of Poland«<sup>9</sup> – and recommended to evaluate it *magna cum laude*.<sup>10</sup> However, she had not only been working on Polish economics until then but had also been

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5 Carsten: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 271; Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, pp. 14–16.

6 Cited in *ibid.*, p. 72.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

8 For a broader discussion see, among others, Jan M. Meijer: *The Russian Colony in Zuerich (1870–1873). A Contribution to the Study of Russian Populism*, Assen 1955; Tamar Lewinsky/Sandrine Mayoraz (Eds.): *East European Jews in Switzerland*, Berlin 2013; Alfred E. Senn: *The Russian Revolution in Switzerland, 1914–1917*, Madison, WI 1971.

9 Rosa Luxemburg: *The Industrial Development of Poland (1898)*. Online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1898/industrial-poland/index.htm>.

10 Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 16.

»studying in the alternative university of revolutionary politics.«<sup>11</sup> In Zurich, Luxemburg turned into a Marxist, initially not free of some kind of orthodoxy,<sup>12</sup> yet she remained a free mind and therefore began to interpret Marx's ideas and writings, a process that would not stop before her death.<sup>13</sup> Luxemburg dealt with Marx critically, questioning his views, and often attempted to use his concepts, particularly his materialist dialectic, yet not in an unreflected way. She would adapt them to her own times and therefore was an undogmatic Marxist, something Marx, and especially Engels as well, would have deemed a worthy continuation of their legacy.<sup>14</sup>

While Luxemburg wrote many theoretical works about the important issues and questions of her time, her main work was that of a journalist and politician. She did not intend to provide a systematic interpretation of Marx, but she wanted to apply Marxist ideas to solve relevant political and social issues. This does not mean that she was not interested or not aware of works and their debates by other revolutionary theorists, but that Luxemburg is rather to be understood as an operative intellectual whose main task was progress, not dry debate. That is why she not only thought about revolutions but was actively engaged in demanding them and, if possible, driving them forward. Her reflections about revolutionary processes were consequently determined by the course of history, which Luxemburg tried to understand and interpret accordingly.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, her works con-

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11 Scott: Introduction, p. 6.

12 Schütrumpf: Zwischen Liebe und Zorn, p. 26.

13 Helmut Seidel: Bemerkungen zu Rosa Luxemburgs Marx-Rezeption, in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 37–52, here p. 38.

14 Rosa Luxemburg: Stillstand und Fortschritt im Marxismus, in: Vorwärts, March 14, 1903.

15 Uwe-Jens Heuer: Rosa Luxemburgs Demokratieverständnis und unsere Epoche – oder: Ist Rosa Luxemburg noch aktuell? in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ih-

tain, as German author Uwe-Jens Heuer called it, the »vivid revolutionary spirit of Marxism.«<sup>16</sup>

During her Marxist socialization in Switzerland, Luxemburg met Leo Jogiches (1867–1919), who would play an important role for the Polish revolutionary as her lover and lifelong friend.<sup>17</sup> Both founded, together with Julian Marchlewski (1866–1925), the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland (SDKP, in 1900 renamed the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, SDKPiL). In contrast to the nationalist course of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), whose members demanded a nationally independent Poland, Luxemburg argued for a solidarization of the Polish and Russian proletariat to achieve a post-revolutionary society, i. e. one based on freedom and equality for both. Therefore, »she advocated the overthrow of the tsarist autocracy in alliance with the Russian working class as the primary task of the Polish revolutionary movement. She aimed at the establishment of a Russian democratic republic within which Poland would merely enjoy cultural autonomy.«<sup>18</sup> Or, to quote Japanese scholar Nobuhiro Takemoto: »As a dedicated revolutionary, Rosa was found in her youth to have been seeking a key to liberate Poland in international proletarian cooperation, and fighting for total human emancipation through such international solidarity as a springboard of such a movement, thus living her life in pursuit of a socialist revolution.«<sup>19</sup> Jogiches and Luxemburg used the magazine *Sprawa Robotnicza* (The Workers' Cause) as a means to advocate their

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res theoretischen Werkes, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 152–170, here p. 152; Schütrumpf: Zwischen Liebe und Zorn, p. 25; Seidel: Bemerkungen, 47.

16 Heuer: Rosa Luxemburgs Demokratieverständnis, p. 152.

17 Tim Mason: Comrade and Lover. Rosa Luxemburg's »Letters to Leo Jogiches«, in: History Workshop 13/1982, pp. 94–109, here p. 95.

18 Carsten: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 271.

19 Nobuhiro Takemoto: Rosa Luxemburg's Arguments on the Socialist Movements, in: Kyoto University Economic Review 41/1971, no. 1, pp. 49–77, here p. 49. Also see Mason: Comrade and Lover, p. 96; Schütrumpf: Zwischen Liebe und Zorn, p. 21.

internationalist ideas. Although the political relationship between the two has been called »symbiotic,«<sup>20</sup> Jogiches often tried to control the overall course, although it has to be emphasized here that he needed Luxemburg's skills as a writer and as somebody who had command of both German and Polish, languages Jogiches initially did not speak. While Luxemburg often gave Jogiches a voice in that regard, the former was able to further intensify her standing as a well educated social democratic internationalist, too.

After finishing her thesis, Luxemburg, who would have faced problems, like exile in Siberia, if she returned to Russian Poland,<sup>21</sup> arranged a move to Germany. Therefore, she arranged a marriage with the son of Carl Lübeck, an old German Social Democrat, for whom Luxemburg had worked as a secretary in Zurich. Her marriage of convenience with Gustav Lübeck in April 1898 consequently made it possible for the Polish revolutionary to move to Berlin, where she would begin her work for the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) when she went on a campaign tour for the party in Upper Silesia in June of the same year.<sup>22</sup> Within the party, the rhetorically gifted young women would gain attention quite fast and she rose to become one of the central figures of the SPD's left wing. There was probably not a man in that party who was not criticized by Luxemburg,<sup>23</sup> who joined a party-organization that was still in dispute about its own course and purpose.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, Luxemburg remained active as a leading figure of the SDKP and later SDKPiL as well, leading a kind of political double life.<sup>25</sup>

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20 Ibid., p. 25.

21 Ibid., 19. On the Siberian exile system see: George Kennan: *Siberia and the Exile System*, 2. vols., New York 1891.

22 Dath: *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 18; Karl Kautsky: *Erinnerungen und Erörterungen*, Den Haag 1960, p. 448.

23 Seidel: *Bemerkungen*, p. 44.

24 Scott: *Introduction*, p. 12.

25 Eric Blanc: *Rosa Luxemburgs Allianz mit der SPD-Bürokratie. Eine Kritik ihrer Politik in Polen, 1893–1918*, in: *Arbeit – Bewegung – Geschichte 18/2019*, no. 2, pp. 27–42, here p. 28.

Luxemburg »consistently challenged convention and shook up institutional patterns«<sup>26</sup> and reminded the SPD about its initial goals. She did not accept a course that was directed towards power instead of revolution. It is no surprise that she caused antagonism, especially from rather conservative men within her own party, since she was so rhetorically gifted that her lectures usually caused aggressive responses to her well-directed and heavily dosed polemics. Paul Frölich, with regard to these skills, emphasized that Luxemburg

was economical in the use of grand words and gestures; she achieved her effect purely by the content of her speeches, though in this she was assisted by a silver toned, rich and melodious voice which could fill, without effort, a great hall. She never spoke from notes, and preferred to walk casually up and down the platform because she felt closer to her audience this way. She could establish contact within a few sentences, and from then onwards she kept her audience completely under her spell.<sup>27</sup>

Whoever witnessed Luxemburg in such a role was deeply impressed, like in August 1893 when Luxemburg, at the age of 22, made her first political appearance in Zurich, climbing a chair and giving a speech at the Congress of the Socialist International.<sup>28</sup> She was a powerful woman, and it is not surprising that her male colleagues in the SPD referred to her and other women, like Clara Zetkin (1857–1933), as »hyenas,«<sup>29</sup> while Luxemburg and Zetkin considered themselves to be the last men of the party.

Luxemburg's first larger debate, or rather theoretical dispute about the practical future of the SPD, arose when Eduard Bernstein (1850–1932) published articles in the *Neue Zeit* in the late 1890s, which he

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26 Scott: Introduction, p. 13.

27 Paul Frölich: Rosa Luxemburg: Ideas in Action, transl. Joanna Hoornweg, London 1972, p. 204 cited in *ibid.*, p. 14.

28 Piper: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 9.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

had titled »Probleme des Sozialismus« (Problems of Socialism) and which were later published in an extended form as a book under the title »Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie« (The Requirements of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy; the English work was published under the title »Evolutionary Socialism« in 1907).<sup>30</sup> In his works, Bernstein offered »Marxism lite«<sup>31</sup> and demanded an evolutionary rather than revolutionary course of the SPD, a demand that the philosopher Miaofen Chen called »a somehow bizarre revision of Marx's texts and theories.«<sup>32</sup> Bernstein's argument was based on the assumption that times had changed since Marx wrote his works and that a revolution was no longer necessary:

In general, one may say [...] that the revolutionary way (always in the sense of revolution by violence) does quicker work as far as it deals with removal of obstacles which a privileged minority places in the path of social progress that its strength lies on its negative side. Constitutional legislation works more slowly in this respect as a rule. Its path is usually that of compromise, not the prohibition, but the buying out of acquired rights. But it is stronger than the revolution scheme where prejudice and the limited horizon of the great mass of the people appear as hindrances to social progress, and it offers greater advantages where it is a question of the creation of permanent economic arrangements capable of lasting; in other words, it is best adapted to positive social-political work. In legislation, intellect dominates over emotion in quiet times;

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30 For a detailed discussion see Wolfgang Eichhorn: Über Eduard Bernstein und Rosa Luxemburg, in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Ed.): Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 297–304.

31 Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 20.

32 Miaofen Chen: From Class to Freedom – Rosa Luxemburg on Revolutionary Spontaneity and Socialist Democracy, in: ARSP: Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie/Archives for Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy 101/2015, no. 1, pp. 75–86, here p. 80.

during a revolution emotion dominates over intellect. But if emotion is often an imperfect leader, the intellect is a slow motive force. Where a revolution sins by over haste, the every-day legislator sins by procrastination. Legislation works as a systematic force, revolution as an elementary force. As soon as a nation has attained a position where the rights of the propertied minority have ceased to be a serious obstacle to social progress, where the negative tasks of political action are less pressing than the positive, then the appeal to a revolution by force becomes a meaningless phrase. One can overturn a government or a privileged minority, but not a nation. When the working classes do not possess very strong economic organisations of their own, and have not attained, by means of education on self-governing bodies, a high degree of mental independence, the dictatorship of the proletariat means the dictatorship of club orators and writers. I would not wish that those who see in the oppression and tricking of the working men's organisations and in the exclusion of working men from the legislature and government the highest point of the art of political policy should experience their error in practice. Just as little would I desire it for the working class movement itself.<sup>33</sup>

Bernstein, with these statements, claimed to provide a necessary update to Marx, and had also, while »acting as one of the literary executors after his death, [...] yoked Engels into the reformist project,«<sup>34</sup> although Marx's dearest friend and intellectual companion had never ceased to be a convinced revolutionary.<sup>35</sup>

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33 Eduard Bernstein: *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie*, Stuttgart 1899. English text taken from <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bernstein/works/1899/evsoc/index.htm>.

34 Helen Scott: *Introduction to Reform or Revolution*, in: Helen Scott (Ed.): *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg. Reform or Revolution & The Mass Strike*, Chicago, IL 2007, pp. 37–40, here p. 37.

35 Frank Jacob: *Friedrich Engels and Revolution Theory. The Legacy of a Revolutionary Life*, in: Frank Jacob (Ed): *Engels @ 200. Reading Friedrich Engels in the 21st Century*, Marburg 2020, pp. 49–60.



Luxemburg countered Bernstein's dichotomy of reform and revolution and thereby challenged the revisionist views within the party, where these seemed to remain unchallenged, because of »the habit of the SPD to compromise, balance, and avoid open disagreements.«<sup>36</sup> The Polish revolutionary, who had just returned from Silesia and knew first-hand about the workers' conditions, »saw that Bernstein was out of touch with the real conditions of workers, and also that his theories represented a fundamental and pernicious challenge to socialism that had to be confronted and rejected.«<sup>37</sup> In her public lectures as well as articles,<sup>38</sup> and finally in her work »Sozialreform oder Revolution?« (Reform or Revolution, 1899), Luxemburg replied to Bernstein's arguments and outlined the necessity for revolution, and she made clear that the SPD changing its course could not be allowed if a successful change toward socialism were ever to be achieved.<sup>39</sup> Since this work is one of the »basic texts of modern revolutionary socialism,«<sup>40</sup> Luxemburg's main points shall be presented here as well.

She highlighted that »[b]etween social reforms and revolution there exists for social democracy an indissoluble tie. The struggle for reform is its means; the social revolution, its aim.«<sup>41</sup> Bernstein, in contrast to the assumption of this existent tie, tried to argue on behalf

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36 Scott: Introduction to Reform or Revolution, p. 38. Also see Krug/Graf: Zur Aktualität, p. 243.

37 Scott: Introduction to Reform or Revolution, p. 38.

38 Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 20.

39 Michael Löwy: Rosa Luxemburg. Der zündende Funke der Revolution, transl. by Arno Münster, Hamburg 2020, p. 11.

40 Ibid., p. 55. On the impact of Reform or Revolution see: Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 20; Ingo Wagner: »Sozialreform oder Revolution?« Historisch passé – oder? in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 171–178.

41 Rosa Luxemburg: Reform or Revolution, in: Helen Scott (Ed): The Essential Rosa Luxemburg: Reform or Revolution & The Mass Strike, Chicago, IL 2007, pp. 41–104, here p. 41.

of an existent »opposition of the two factors of the labor movement. His theory tends to counsel us to renounce the social transformation, the final goal of the social democracy and, inversely, to make of social reforms, the means of the class struggle, its aim.«<sup>42</sup> Luxemburg considered such an interpretation as treason, because »[t]he opportunist theory in the party, the theory formulated by Bernstein, is nothing else than an unconscious attempt to assure predominance to the petty bourgeois elements that have entered our party, to change the policy and aims of our party in their direction.«<sup>43</sup> In contrast to Bernstein, Luxemburg did not abandon the revolutionary belief that the masses had to liberate themselves and thereby continued Engels's demand for a mass revolution: »Only when the great mass of workers take the keen and dependable weapons of scientific socialism in their own hands will all the petty bourgeois inclinations, all the opportunistic currents, come to naught.«<sup>44</sup> She also emphasized that class struggle was still essential for the realization of socialism: »From [Bernstein's] theoretical stand is derived the following general conclusion about the practical work of social democracy. The latter must not direct its daily activity toward the conquest of political power, but toward the betterment of the condition of the working class within the existing order. It must not be expected to institute socialism as a result of a political and social crisis, but should build socialism by means of the progressive extension of social control and the gradual application of the principle of cooperation.«<sup>45</sup> Luxemburg also criticized Bernstein for considering these theoretical reflections to be in line with Marx, although in reality he argued for leaving the socialist path to revolution. The SPD politician, in contrast, rather called for a reliance on trade unions to achieve social reforms for »the political democratization of

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42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., p. 43

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., p. 44.

the state,« because he considered these aspects to be »the means of the progressive realization of socialism.«<sup>46</sup> Luxemburg criticized these views as follows:

At present, the trade union struggle and parliamentary practice are considered to be the means of guiding and educating the proletariat in preparation for the task of taking over power. From the revisionist standpoint, this conquest of power is at the same time impossible and useless. And therefore, trade union and parliamentary activity are to be carried on by the party only for their immediate results, that is, for the purpose of bettering the present situation of the workers, for the gradual reduction of capitalist exploitation, for the extension of social control. [...] From the viewpoint of a movement for socialism, the trade union struggle and parliamentary practice are vastly important insofar as they make socialistic the awareness, the consciousness, of the proletariat and help to organize it as a class. But once they are considered as instruments of the direct socialization of capitalist economy, they lose not only their usual effectiveness but cease being means of preparing the working class for the conquest of power.<sup>47</sup>

Luxemburg also refers to Bernstein's claim that legislative reform, i. e. »a methodical force,« and revolution, i. e. »a spontaneous force,« were two dichotomic elements on the path to a socialist society.<sup>48</sup> Luxemburg countered this Bernsteinian dichotomy and declared:

Legislative reform and revolution are not different methods of historical development that can be picked out at pleasure from the counter of history, just as one chooses hot or cold sausages. Legislative reform and revolution are different *factors* in the development of class society. They

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46 Ibid., p. 56.

47 Ibid., pp. 66–67.

48 Ibid., p. 89.

condition and complement each other, and are at the same time reciprocally exclusive, as are the north and south poles, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Every legal constitution is the *product* of a revolution. In the history of classes, revolution is an act of political creation, while legislation is the political expression of the life of a society that has already come into being.<sup>49</sup>

For Luxemburg, reform and revolution actually went hand in hand, as »work for reforms is carried on only in the direction given to it by the impetus of the last revolution, and continues as long as the impulsion of the last revolution continues to make itself felt.«<sup>50</sup> All in all, a revolution was for her »a condensed series of reforms,«<sup>51</sup> which is why the separation of the two elements, as intended by Bernstein's clear distinction between one and the other, would have been fatal for the socialist movement and its revolutionary duty. And Luxemburg did not mince her words when bringing this oxymoronic interpretation of Marx's ideas about revolution into plain sight:

[P]eople who pronounce themselves in favor of the method of legislative reform *in place of and in contradistinction to* the conquest of political power and social revolution do not really choose a more tranquil, calmer, and slower road to the *same* goal, but a *different* goal. Instead of taking a stand for the establishment of a new society they take a stand for surface modifications to the old society. If we follow the political conceptions of revisionism, we arrive at the same conclusion that is reached when we follow the economic theories of revisionism. Our program becomes not the realization of *socialism*, but the reform of *capitalism*: not the suppression of the system of wage labor, but the diminution of exploita-

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49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., p. 90.

51 Ibid.

tion, that is, the suppression of the abuses of capitalism instead of the suppression of capitalism itself.<sup>52</sup>

Consequently, Bernstein's demands were out of the question for Luxemburg, who also argued that »[h]is theory condemns the proletariat, at the most decisive moments of the struggle, to inactivity, to a passive betrayal of its own cause.«<sup>53</sup> In contrast to Bernstein, Luxemburg demanded that the masses be actively involved in the revolution and argued that revolution was the only possible way to achieve an overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the capitalist order it represented. Agreeing with Bernstein was similar to defeat by surrender, because according to the revisionist position, »the final aim of the socialist movement is really a recommendation to renounce the socialist movement itself.«<sup>54</sup> For the anti-revisionists around Luxemburg, it was clear that this could not have been the chosen method for the SPD, but that without a revolution there would be no hope for a democratic socialism in the future, no chance to overcome the existent class society.

What Luxemburg asked for was consequently a revolutionary practice, a position Luxemburg would not give up on, as she believed in the potential of the masses to democratically drive a revolution to the point where it would actually achieve a better future for all people.<sup>55</sup> The debate with Bernstein made her well known in Germany, even beyond the SPD, and she was joined by other social democrats, first and foremost by Karl Kautsky, who also criticized Bernstein's position, until the Party Congress in Dresden in 1903 solved the issue in favor of the anti-revisionists.<sup>56</sup> In later publications, Luxemburg expressed

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52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., p. 94.

54 Ibid., p. 96.

55 Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, pp. 21–22.

56 Schüttrumpf: Zwischen Liebe und Zorn, p. 30. The protocol of the Party Congress can be obtained online at: <http://library.fes.de/parteitage/pdf/pt-jahr/pt-1903.pdf>.

similar anti-Bernsteinian views again, namely that she considered parliamentarianism to be one historical form of bourgeois class rule, and therefore continued to argue on behalf of a revolutionary course.<sup>57</sup> »Reform or Revolution« must therefore also be regarded as a summary of an »original Marxism«<sup>58</sup> that Luxemburg wanted to be taken seriously with regard to future party activities.<sup>59</sup>

After this heated debate that cemented Luxemburg's further role within the German social democratic context, she tried to deal with some personal issues. Her father had died in 1900 and had previously always tried to talk his daughter into a »real marriage« with Jogiches, who was now being pressured by his partner to move to Berlin to join her there. They began to live together, but Jogiches used the illness of his brother Ossip to escape from the relationship for a few months before he returned to Berlin after the latter's death.<sup>60</sup> However, her involvement in the International Socialist Bureau of the Second International after 1903 and the split of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (POSDR) brought her into conflict with Lenin, whom she would also criticize after the Russian Revolutions in 1917. »[W]ithout ever using the word or the concept ›totalitarianism,‹ Rosa Luxemburg had a prescient feeling for the totalitarian potential in Lenin's views.«<sup>61</sup> Early on, she criticized the organizational aspects of Lenin's party-related concepts, i. e. the idea of an avant-garde par-

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57 Rosa Luxemburg: Sozialdemokratie und Parlamentarismus, in: *GW*, vol 1/2, pp. 447–455.

58 Schüttrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 32.

59 Lelio Basso: *Rosa Luxemburg y la ambigüedad de la Historia*, in: *Materiales* 3/1977, pp. 8–26, here p. 15.

60 Dath: *Rosa Luxemburg*, pp. 22–23.

61 Bertram D. Wolfe: *Rosa Luxemburg and V. I. Lenin. The Opposite Poles of Revolutionary Socialism*, in: *The Antioch Review* 21/1961, no. 2, pp. 209–226, here p. 209. Also see Annette Jost: *Rosa Luxemburg y su crítica de Lenin*, in: *Materiales* 3/1977, pp. 196–222, here p. 197.

ty.<sup>62</sup> In Luxemburg's work »Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy« (1904), she emphasized the role of the spontaneous masses, whose actions would be more important than the »leadership« of a party.

Our cause made great gains [...]. However, the initiative and conscious leadership of the Social Democratic organizations played an insignificant role in this development. It is true that these organizations were not specifically prepared for such happenings. However, the unimportant part played by the revolutionists cannot be explained by this fact. Neither can it be attributed to the absence of an all-powerful central party apparatus similar to what is asked for by Lenin. The existence of such a guiding center would have probably increased the disorder of the local committees by emphasizing the difference between the eager attack of the mass and the prudent position of the Social Democracy. The same phenomenon – the insignificant part played by the initiative of central party organs in the elaboration of actual tactical policy – can be observed today in Germany and other countries. In general, the tactical policy of the Social Democracy is not something that may be »invented.« It is the product of a series of great creative acts of the often spontaneous class struggle seeking its way forward.<sup>63</sup>

This also shows that Luxemburg was always critical when individuals tried to reinterpret Marx's ideas about revolution in a way that would

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62 Günter Bartsch: Die Aktualität Rosa Luxemburgs in Osteuropa, in: Osteuropa 25/1975, no. 10, pp. 848–854, here p. 849–850; Tetsuro Kato: Organisationstheorie Rosa Luxemburgs. Geburt und Scheitern der KPD-Satzung von 1919 als »dezentralisierte Assoziation«, in: Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies 24/1992, no. 1, pp. 25–33, here p. 25. For Lenin's views see: Lenin, Wladimir I.: Brief an einen Genossen über unsere organisatorischen Aufgaben (1902), in: Lenin, Wladimir I.: Werke, Berlin 1959, vol. 6, pp. 223–244.

63 Rosa Luxemburg: Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy (1904). Online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1904/questions-rsd/chori.htm>.

lead away from the revolution of the masses as the ultimate precondition for the proletariat to decide the class struggle in its favor. It is therefore natural that »[h]er vigorous support of proletarian »spontaneity« was in sharp contrast to Lenin's violent distrust of it.«<sup>64</sup> The latter demanded a hierarchical-military form of organization for the party,<sup>65</sup> while the leading members of the SDKPiL, first and foremost Luxemburg, were in favor of the masses acting independently in an anti-capitalist and emancipatory way.<sup>66</sup>

This theoretical dispute between Lenin and Luxemburg is not only important but a central one, »because it concerns a basic problem which increasingly troubled Marxists at the beginning of the twentieth century: the dilemma of the non-revolutionary proletariat.«<sup>67</sup> That such theoretical disputes were possible at all was a consequence of the fact that the masses had been less revolutionary than expected by Marx and Engels.<sup>68</sup> What Luxemburg wanted to prevent was a corruption of the revolutionary process by a party organization, whose representatives would not lead but rather eventually control the masses.<sup>69</sup> The latter should remain independent and secure the democratic course of the revolution:

In popular revolutions it is not the party committee under the all powerful and brilliant leader or the little circle calling itself a fighting organization which counts, but only the broad masses shedding their blood.

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64 Charles F. Elliott: Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and the Dilemma of the Non-Revolutionary Proletariat, in: *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 9/1965, no. 4, pp. 327–338, here p. 332.

65 *Ibid.*, pp. 331–332.

66 Schüttrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 22.

67 Elliott: Lenin, p. 327. Hannah Arendt also reflected on Luxemburg's critique of Lenin and considered it important and excellently framed. See Moreault: *Hannah Arendt*, p. 227.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 328.

69 Rosa Luxemburg: *Wieder Masse und Führer* (1911), in: *GW*, vol. 3, pp. 37–44, here p. 40.



The »socialists« may imagine that the masses of the working people must be trained under their orders for the armed struggles, but, in reality, in every revolution it is the masses themselves who find the means of struggle best suited to the given conditions.<sup>70</sup>

According to Luxemburg's theoretical assumptions, the masses should not be led to become revolutionary but be involved in the existent system to realize its contradictions. She thereby formulated what German sociologist and philosopher Frigga Haug referred to as »revolutionary realpolitik.«<sup>71</sup> Enlightenment, in the sense of information about the current class struggle, needed to be available to the masses, a task the party could work on, but the eventual decision for a revolution had to be made by the people themselves. Every theoretical debate consequently had to have a value for revolutionary practice as well, because theory alone would never lead to change without the action of the consciously revolutionary masses.<sup>72</sup> Luxemburg's experience during the Russian Revolution in 1905/06 gave her some valuable impressions about revolutionary activities, and a mass strike would later be one of the methods recommended by Luxemburg as such an action.<sup>73</sup> Her findings in relation to that revolutionary experience shall be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

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70 Cited in Frölich, Rosa Luxemburg, p. 117.

71 Frigga Haug: Standbein und Spielbein – Rosa Luxemburgs Konzept von revolutionärer Realpolitik, in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 139–151, here p. 146.

72 Heuer: Rosa Luxemburgs Demokratieverständnis, p. 170.

73 Daniel Egan: Rosa Luxemburg and the Mass Strike. Rethinking Gramsci's Critique, in: *Socialism and Democracy* 33/2019, no. 2, pp. 46–66. On the role of the mass strike in Luxemburg's thoughts see: Bartsch: Die Aktualität Rosa Luxemburgs, pp. 851–852; Krug/Graf: Zur Aktualität, p. 241.



## Revolution in Russia in 1905

As mentioned before, Rosa Luxemburg was an internationalist and a revolutionary who was not only concerned about the course of the German Social Democratic Party, but also about Russia and the Polish development within the Tsarist Empire.<sup>1</sup> After she began to become politically active, she was consequently broadly involved in the Central European revolution movement and commented on Polish events as much as she participated in German debates. The SDKPiL published journals (*Przegląd Socjaldemokratyczny*, 1902–1904, and *Czerwony Sztandar* from 1903) in which Luxemburg was one of the leading voices. Within her articles she was, as mentioned earlier, against the nationalist position of the PPS, and rather demanded a solidarization of the Polish and Russian workers' movements to create a truly internationalist revolutionary potential.<sup>2</sup> The end of the Russian autocratic rule and the European reactionary forces needed parallel revolution-

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- 1 Ernstgert Kalbe: Rosa Luxemburg zur nationalen Problematik im Kontext von Krieg und Revolution, in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 179–199, here p. 179.
  - 2 Holger Politt: Unter Blitz und Donner. Zusammenstoß zweier Zeitalter, in: Rosa Luxemburg: Arbeiterrevolution 1905/06, ed. and transl. by Holger Politt, Berlin 2015, pp. 9–34, here p. 14. On Luxemburg's position towards the Polish question see Holger Politt: Die polnische Frage bei Rosa Luxemburg, in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 200–214.

ary upheavals in Warsaw, Moscow, and St. Petersburg, which, according to Luxemburg, meant an orchestrated internationalist revolution against the rule of the Tsar and the capitalist system of exploitation he stood for.<sup>3</sup> At the Congress of the International in Amsterdam in August 1904 and backed by Kautsky, Luxemburg would gain attention for her ideas and was also so successful in her anti-revisionist agitation that a majority of the delegates at the Congress eventually agreed that class struggle and not reforms would lead to socialism.<sup>4</sup>

When she returned to Germany, however, she had to face trial for *lèse-majesté* because she had insulted Wilhelm II (1859–1941) during one of her agitation speeches. She had called him a man who had no clue about the sorrows of the German workers, and although this might have been true, the government came after the Polish revolutionary. She was sentenced to three months in jail, although she was later released after only six weeks due to an amnesty granted after the accession of Friedrich August III (1865–1932) to the Saxonian throne on 15 October 1904.<sup>5</sup> Fresh out of jail, Luxemburg turned her attention to Russia, where the Russo-Japanese War<sup>6</sup> had shown that the Tsarist Empire was militarily weaker than many observers had anticipated and that the revolutionary potential seemed to have been ripe to create internal turmoil. In May 1904, Luxemburg had already emphasized the impact this war would have as follows:

The thunder of the cannons of Port Arthur – which have made the stock exchanges of Europe tremble convulsively – recall to the intel-

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3 Rosyjscy socjaldemokraci o polskiej i narodowościowej kwestii, in: *Przegląd Socjaldemokratyczny*, Nr. 2, Februar 1903, S. 74–78, cited in Politt: *Unter Blitz und Donner*, p. 16. Also see Kalbe: *Rosa Luxemburg zur nationalen Problematik*, p. 179.

4 Dath: *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 28.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Frank Jacob: *The Russo-Japanese War and Its Shaping of the Twentieth Century*, London/New York 2018.

ligible voices of these socialist ideologists of bourgeois society that, in their fantasies of European peace, they'd forgotten only one thing: modern *colonial politics*, which have, as of now, gone beyond the stage of local European conflicts in transporting them to the Great Ocean. The Russo-Japanese War now gives to all an awareness that even war and peace in Europe – its destiny – isn't decided between the four walls of the European concert, but outside it, in the gigantic maelstrom of world and colonial politics. And its in this that the real meaning of the current war resides for social-democracy, even if we set aside its immediate effect: the collapse of Russian absolutism. This war brings the gaze of the international proletariat back to the great political and economic connectedness of the world, and violently dissipates in our ranks the particularism, the pettiness of ideas that form in any period of political calm.<sup>7</sup>

In December 1904, when the first major Japanese victories on both land and sea had been observed, the DSKPiL published a call to the workers of Russia, especially in its Polish lands, in which the party board claimed that the »moment has come« for »the workers in Poland« to get rid of the »yoke of Tsarist despotism.«<sup>8</sup> It was time to »win political freedoms« and become part of the civilized world. The Russo-Japanese War marked the right time for a revolutionary uprising, as »[t]he Tsarist regime, this monstrosity which has been sucking and choking millions of people for centuries, is wavering in its foundations. The Japanese war exposed the rotting of this monstrosity and ignited the revolutionary struggle among the broad masses of the working class in Russia.«<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the party leadership em-

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7 Rosa Luxemburg: *In the Storm* (1904). Online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1904/05/01.htm>.

8 Aufruf des Hauptvorstands der Sozialdemokratie des Königreichs Polen und Litauens (SDKPiL) vom Dezember 1904, in: Rosa Luxemburg: *Arbeiterrevolution 1905/06*, ed. and transl. by Holger Politt, Berlin 2015, pp. 50–52, here p. 50.

9 Ibid.

phasized that the revolution needed to be driven by the masses, who would secure the named political freedoms for all, against a minority of people who only represented the aristocracy or the interests of the bourgeoisie.<sup>10</sup>

The war in East Asia sparked the revolution<sup>11</sup> when the regime reacted violently against the protesters who, led by the priest Georgy Apollonovich Gapon (1870–1906), had marched to the Tsar’s Winter Palace on 22 January 1905 to request his support against the suffering of the industrial workers and the granting of some popular rights. Gapon described the events of the day, which would later be remembered as Bloody Sunday and marked the point of no return within the revolutionary process in 1905,<sup>12</sup> as follows:

The crowd had grown to immense proportions. The men came with their wives, and some with their children, all in their Sunday clothes; and I noticed that argument or dispute among them was at once stopped by such words as, »This is not the time for talking.« Soon after ten we started upon our journey from just outside the south-western boundary of the city to its centre at the Winter Palace – the first procession that ever went through the streets of St. Petersburg to demand of the Sovereign some recognition of popular rights. It was a dry, frosty morning, typical of the Russian mild winter. I had warned the men that whoever carried the banners might fall the first in case of shooting; but in answer to my invitation a crowd of them rushed forward, fighting for this dangerous distinction. An old woman, who evidently wished to give her son, a boy

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10 Ibid., p. 51.

11 On the Russian Revolution of 1905 see Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, pp. 28–34. A more detailed and extensive survey of the revolution of 1905 is provided by Abraham Ascher: *The Revolution of 1905. A Short History*, Stanford, CA 2004.

12 Frank Jacob: *Revolutionen und Weltgeschichte*, in: Frank Jacob/Riccardo Altieri (Hrsg.): *Revolution. Beiträge zu einem historischen Phänomen der globalen Moderne*, Berlin 2019, pp. 11–40.

of seventeen, a chance of seeing the Tsar, placed an icon in his hands and put him in the front rank. In the first row were the men carrying a large framed portrait of the Tsar [...] They all marched bareheaded, in spite of the bitter cold, full of the simple intention of seeing their Sovereign in order, as one of them said, »to cry out their griefs like children on the breast of their father.«<sup>13</sup>

When these people were attacked by the Tsar's Army later that day, the »bond between the mass of workers and the Tsar's government was cut,«<sup>14</sup> and the chances for a compromise vanished. Luxemburg commented on these events in January 1905 and condemned the reaction of the absolutist ruler in Russia, who »had shown its heroic greatness by staining the pavement of St. Petersburg with the blood of the proletariat that was fighting for freedom.«<sup>15</sup> However, the workers who marched to the Winter Palace were only the »alarming harbinger of the people's revolution.«<sup>16</sup> Spontaneously, in consequence of the events of 22 January, the revolution had broken out in St. Petersburg and, surprisingly, due to the loyal body of the workers, who had hoped that the Tsar would react positively to their demands and grant them some rights as a form of compromise.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of such hopes, the violent answer that day caused a mass strike and the spread of revolution, although the regime had hoped to be able to suppress the revolutionary process in the capital.

Luxemburg, almost naturally, »threw herself into agitation throughout Germany«<sup>18</sup> on behalf of the Russian workers and also published

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13 George Gapon: *The Story of My Life*, New York 1906, pp. 178–179.

14 Politt: *Unter Blitz und Donner*, p. 17.

15 Rosa Luxemburg: *Aufstand des Petersburger Proletariats* (January 1905), in: *Rosa Luxemburg: Arbeiterrevolution 1905/06*, ed. and transl. by Holger Politt, Berlin 2015, pp. 54–59, here p. 56.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

18 Scott: *Introduction*, p. 15.

several articles in Polish about the events. She received her information from Jogiches and other colleagues in Poland and Russia. Luxemburg was quite enthusiastic about the mass strike and the active participation of the workers in the revolution.<sup>19</sup> In December 1905 she decided to move to Warsaw, where she arrived two days after the failure of the mass strike, but she remained optimistic that the revolution could still be successful and wrote about the revolution and the events related to it in the following months.<sup>20</sup> However, the counter-revolution, after the end of the war in East Asia, began to suppress the protesters, and in March 1906, although they had not been involved in any public events, Luxemburg and Jogiches, who had also been in Warsaw, were arrested. Luxemburg was taken to the prison in Warsaw Town Hall, before she was later taken to the city's famous prison, the Citadel.<sup>21</sup> Although Luxemburg had been tarned as a German journalist with the alias Anna Matschke, the authorities had eventually found her. In Germany, August Bebel (1840–1913) tried to use diplomatic pressure to free her, while her Polish comrades collected 3,000 Rubles for her bail and also made it publicly known that they would begin to kill Russian officials if Luxemburg were to be harmed in any way.<sup>22</sup>

Eventually, the Polish revolutionary was able to leave prison and moved to Kuokkala in Finland (today's Repino in Russia), from where she would sometimes travel to St. Petersburg to meet with Russian revolutionaries, such as Alexander Parvus (1867–1924) and Leon Trotsky (1879–1940).<sup>23</sup> Although Luxemburg hated hiding and lacking the freedom of an open revolutionary fight,<sup>24</sup> she resided in Kuokkala

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19 Politt: *Unter Blitz und Donner*, p. 18.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

21 Schüttrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 36; Scott: Introduction, p. 16.

22 Dath: *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 33; Politt: *Unter Blitz und Donner*, p. 20; Schüttrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, pp. 1–17.

23 Dath: *Rosa Luxemburg*, pp. 33–34; Schüttrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 17.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 36.



under the name of Felicia Budelovich and began to write her reflections about the Russian Revolution of 1905 as well as her work on the mass strike.<sup>25</sup> In these days, she also debated with Lenin and his followers about the revolution and its failure, continuing the theoretical discourse they had had in previous years about its organization and the nature of a possibly more successful revolutionary movement.<sup>26</sup> Grigory Zinoviev (1883–1936) would later remember Luxemburg as a woman who possessed the »characteristics of a fiery agitator, a brilliant politician and at the same time [was] one of the greatest theorists and writers of Marxism united.«<sup>27</sup>

In August 1906 she expressed her worries about the future of the revolution, if party structures were to be too decisive for its course, when she told Luise and Karl Kautsky in a letter, almost prophetically for Russia in 1917 and Germany in 1918/19: »By God, the revolution is big and strong if social democracy won't destroy it!«<sup>28</sup> In September 1906 she managed to escape from Finland and got back to Germany. Although she would never return to Warsaw, her experiences there during the Revolution of 1905 were important to further strengthen her views about the role of the masses and their revolutionary potential. She also remained optimistic that although the revolution had failed this time, there was no alternative. For her, the events in 1905/06 had been proof of the existent class struggle, which needed to be fought by revolutionary means and not through slow reforms. She was also sure that a revolution by a minority was not the way to achieve a socialist society, a view that was even stronger in 1906 than in the earlier, more theoretical debates with Lenin.<sup>29</sup> For Luxemburg,

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25 Politt: *Unter Blitz und Donner*, p. 21.

26 Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, pp. 79–81.

27 Grigory Yevseyevich Zinovyev: *Zwei große Verluste*, in: Karl Liebknecht und Rosa Luxemburg, Petrograd 1920, pp. 18–19, cited in *ibid.*, p. 18.

28 Rosa Luxemburg to Luise and Karl Kautsky, August 11, 1906, cited in Politt: *Unter Blitz und Donner*, p. 21.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 18–29; Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 18.

it was now more than obvious »that immediately after the victory over the tsarist rule, the proletariat must necessarily seize political power in the form of a Provisional Government in which proven revolutionary forces played the leading role.«<sup>30</sup> In this position, the proletariat needed to secure the aims of the revolution, i. e. the realization of socialism, before its course would swing back to a »normal,« non-revolutionary stage.<sup>31</sup> She would later express similar thoughts with regard to the events of 1917 as well. Her works in relation to the Russian Revolution of 1905, nevertheless, already expressed some of her main theoretical reflections about the events, pointing to the fact that Luxemburg's revolution theory was based on revolutionary practice.

Luxemburg described the events in Warsaw in May 1905 and the violent reactions of the regime against the workers' strike movement.<sup>32</sup> She described the fear of the absolutist ruler of the power of a revolution by the masses, driven forward like an avalanche, like a proletarian army whose soldiers had gathered around the flag of social democracy.<sup>33</sup> Regardless of the countless victims of the Polish proletariat, including Marcin Kasprzak (1860–1905), the »martyr« of the workers' class struggle, the revolution continued on its way forward without any hesitation.<sup>34</sup> The regime at the same time only left »scorched earth« behind whenever it had to draw back from a defensive line against the revolutionary movement.<sup>35</sup> It used dragoons and cossacks

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30 Politt: *Unter Blitz und Donner*, p. 31.

31 *Ibid.*

32 Rosa Luxemburg: *Ein Jahr der Revolution (May 27, 1905)*, in: Rosa Luxemburg: *Arbeiterrevolution 1905/06*, ed. and transl. by Holger Politt, Berlin 2015, pp. 80–83, here p. 80.

33 *Ibid.*

34 Rosa Luxemburg: *Es Lebe die Revolution!*, in: Rosa Luxemburg: *Arbeiterrevolution 1905/06*, ed. and transl. by Holger Politt, Berlin 2015, pp. 130–132, here p. 132.

35 Luxemburg: *Ein Jahr der Revolution*, p. 82. On the cruelties of the counter-revolutionary forces in Moscow see: Rosa Luxemburg: *Bewaffnete Revolution in Moskau (January 3, 1906)*, in: Rosa Luxemburg: *Arbeiterrevolu-*

against the protesters, and could only win because the mass of the soldiers remained neutral, because they had been locked in their barracks.<sup>36</sup> This time, the revolution was unable to gain their support, but Luxemburg, similarly to Engels before her, remained optimistic that the soldiers could not be segregated from the revolutionary masses forever but would sooner or later join the revolution as well.<sup>37</sup>

For Luxemburg, one central lesson of the events in 1905/06 was the realization that the working class first and foremost had to rely on its own strength. It had to learn from the revolutionary processes of the past and use its knowledge for its future path toward a successful revolution that would eventually realize the socialist ambition for a classless society.<sup>38</sup> She also compared the events to the French Revolution and considered the Russian Revolution of 1905 to be »a breakthrough in human history.«<sup>39</sup> Bloody Sunday had marked the beginning of a »new era in the history of all modern countries,«<sup>40</sup> an era that began of all places in the »Tsarist Empire, the oldest stronghold of barbarism.«<sup>41</sup> It was the general strike in response to the events of Bloody Sunday that saw the birth of a revolutionary working class that consciously longed for a change of the existent order.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, Luxemburg prophetically announced that the Tsarist regime would end before the third anniversary of that day, yet this evaluation

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tion 1905/06, ed. and transl. by Holger Politt, Berlin 2015, pp. 146–150, here p. 149.

36 Ibid., p. 150.

37 Ibid.

38 Rosa Luxemburg: Kritik in der Arbeiterbewegung (January 9, 1906), in: Rosa Luxemburg: Arbeiterrevolution 1905/06, ed. and transl. by Holger Politt, Berlin 2015, pp. 151–154, here p. 151.

39 Rosa Luxemburg: Das Jahr der Revolution (January 28, 1906), Rosa Luxemburg: Arbeiterrevolution 1905/06, ed. and transl. by Holger Politt, Berlin 2015, pp. 181–187, here p. 181.

40 Ibid., p. 182.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., p. 184.

was rather too optimistic, especially since the end of the Russo-Japanese War had been achieved early enough to prevent a further increase in the revolutionary mass movement's influence. The Tsar had also announced reforms, although they would ultimately not materialize, and the promised change turned out to be nothing more than a fraud.

Luxemburg's actual impressions of the revolutionary process were vital for her theoretical considerations. It was obvious that social democracy had to play within the rules of the bourgeois society in non-revolutionary times, acting within the existent legal boundaries of the capitalist system.<sup>43</sup> Only the revolution could provide the context in which these limitations could be overcome and the class struggle could actually be taken up unchallenged by the proletarian masses.<sup>44</sup> For Luxemburg, the revolutionary tactics of the working class consequently had to be based on efforts that would »strive for the complete and de facto rule of the proletariat, strive for a kind of political ›dictatorship‹ of the proletariat, admittedly not to bring about the socialist overthrow, but first of all to achieve the goals of the revolution.«<sup>45</sup> The »dictatorship of the proletariat« Luxemburg was talking about in 1906 would ultimately hold the power to fulfill the revolutionary ambitions of the working class,<sup>46</sup> yet, like Marx and Engels before her, she does not explain what exactly is meant by that, but she also believed in the revolutionary potential of the masses within the climax of this class struggle.<sup>47</sup> The events of 1917 would later demand her to reflect on this question again, as will be shown in some detail later on. It was nevertheless her idea that this »dictatorship of

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43 Rosa Luxemburg: *Taktik der Revolution* (March 23, 1906), in: Rosa Luxemburg: *Arbeiterrevolution 1905/06*, ed. and transl. by Holger Politt, Berlin 2015, pp. 204–209, here p. 205.

44 *Ibid.*

45 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

46 *Ibid.*

47 Krug/Graf: *Zur Aktualität*, p. 240.

the proletariat« had to secure the achievements of the revolution before the revolutionary pendulum would swing back:

The fighting proletariat must of course have no illusions about the duration of its rule in society. After the end of the current revolution, after the return of society to »normal« conditions, the rule of the bourgeoisie, both within the factory and in the state, will in the first phase most certainly push aside and eliminate a large part of what has been achieved in the current revolutionary struggle. It is all the more important that the proletariat breaks the strongest breaches in the present situation, that it revolutionizes the conditions within the factory and in society as far as possible.<sup>48</sup>

Though the term might have remained vague, another article in June 1906 discussed Luxemburg's position in a bit more detail, and although she had demanded a »dictatorship of the proletariat,« she emphasized that this would not mean the rule of a minority:

The realization of socialism by a minority is absolutely impossible, since the very idea of socialism precludes the rule of a minority. So the proletariat will lose power to the majority the next day after its political victory over tsarist rule. In concrete terms: After the fall of the tsarist rule, power will pass to the revolutionary part of society, to the proletariat, because this proletariat will occupy all posts and will remain in the post until power falls into the hands of those legally appointed to do so in the hands of the new government, which can only be determined by the constituent assembly, by the legislative body elected by the entire population.<sup>49</sup>

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48 Luxemburg: *Taktik der Revolution*, p. 208.

49 Rosa Luxemburg: *Blanquismus und Sozialdemokratie* (June 27, 1906), Rosa Luxemburg: *Arbeiterrevolution 1905/06*, ed. and transl. by Holger Politt, Berlin 2015, pp. 214–219, here p. 218.

At the same time, Luxemburg had consequently realized that the masses were not as revolutionary as they needed to be to achieve socialism's aims: »But in view of the fact that in society it is not the working class or the proletariat that makes up the majority, but the petty bourgeoisie and the peasants, there will be no majority of the social democrats in the constituent assembly, but of the peasant-petty-bourgeois democrats. We may find that unfortunate, but we cannot change it.«<sup>50</sup> Sooner or later, society would get back to »normal« conditions, which was why the revolution had to secure as much social progress as possible to provide the best possible conditions for the post-revolutionary order.

The revolution, as Luxemburg outlined in another article, was therefore just an acceleration of changes that had to be implemented by the proletariat to secure as much change as they could.<sup>51</sup> Her outlook for the future and other revolutions therefore remained naturally optimistic, as long as the unity of the proletariat could be secured: »Experience clearly shows that ... only the united, concentrated revolution can secure the triumph of democracy, but not the scattered one, which is torn into isolated constituencies.«<sup>52</sup> Ten years after the Russian Revolution of 1905, in her »Junius Pamphlet,« Luxemburg provided the following evaluation of the events, and though she considered the revolution had failed, she also thought it to be an important step for revolutionary development on the proletarian path to socialism:

The revolution was overthrown, but the very causes that led to its temporary downfall are valuable in a discussion of the position taken by the German social democracy in this war. That the Russian uprising in 1905–06 was unsuccessful in spite of its unequalled expenditure of revo-

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Rosa Luxemburg: Praxis der Revolution (September 5, 1906), in: Rosa Luxemburg: Arbeiterrevolution 1905/06, ed. and transl. by Holger Politt, Berlin 2015, pp. 233–238, here p. 234.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

lutionary force, its clearness of purpose and tenacity can be ascribed to two distinct causes. The one lies in the inner character of the revolution itself, in its enormous historical program, in the mass of economic and political problems that it was forced to face. Some of them, for instance, the agrarian problem, cannot possibly be solved within capitalist society. There was the difficulty furthermore of creating a class state for the supremacy of the modern bourgeoisie against the counter-revolutionary opposition of the bourgeoisie as a whole. To the onlooker it would seem that the Russian Revolution was doomed to failure because it was a proletarian revolution with bourgeois duties and problems, or if you wish, a bourgeois revolution waged by socialist proletarian methods, a crash of two generations amid lightning and thunder, the fruit of the delayed industrial development of class conditions in Russia and their over-ripeness in Western Europe. From this point of view its downfall in 1906 signifies not its bankruptcy, but the natural closing of the first chapter, upon which the second must follow with the inevitability of a natural law.<sup>53</sup>

It was part of this »natural law,« to which Luxemburg referred ten years after her remarks in March 1906, that »[t]he revolution does not tolerate half measures and drives everything to the ultimate conclusion, unfolds all contradictions.«<sup>54</sup> At the same time, she considered the revolution to be »like a magical force that is able to bring hidden things to the surface and which, under our conditions, holds an inexorable dilemma: either the camp of social democracy or the camp of reaction!«<sup>55</sup>

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53 Rosa Luxemburg: *Die Krise der Sozialdemokratie* (1916), online: <http://www.mlwerke.de/lu/luf.htm> (15.11.2020), V. Aber der Zarismus! English text taken from: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/cho5.htm>.

54 Rosa Luxemburg: *Unter Einwirkung der Revolution* (March 8, 1906), in: Rosa Luxemburg: *Arbeiterrevolution 1905/06*, ed. and transl. by Holger Pöhl, Berlin 2015, pp. 200–203, here p. 203.

55 *Ibid.*

Having observed the role of the mass strike during the events in Poland, Luxemburg also emphasized its role, which she considered to be a consequence, not a means, of revolution.<sup>56</sup> It was an essential element of the revolutionary process, as the Polish revolutionary highlighted in her work »The Mass Strike« (1906) in some detail:

The mass strike is the first natural, impulsive form of every great revolutionary struggle of the proletariat and the more highly developed the antagonism is between capital and labour, the more effective and decisive must mass strikes become. The chief form of previous bourgeois revolutions, the fight at the barricades, the open conflict with the armed power of the state, is in the revolution today only the culminating point, only a moment on the process of the proletarian mass struggle. [...] History has found the solution in a deeper and finer fashion: in the advent of revolutionary mass strikes, which, of course, in no way replaces brutal street fights or renders them unnecessary, but which reduces them to a moment in the long period of political struggle, and which at the same time unites with the revolutionary period and enormous cultural work in the most exact sense of the words: the material and intellectual elevation of the whole working class through the »civilising« of the barbaric forms of capitalist exploitation.<sup>57</sup>

Luxemburg's ideas did not reach the majority of the SPD when she presented her thoughts at the Party Congress in 1906, but it laid the foundations, as Jörn Schütrumpf remarked later, for the party's left in the years to come. Although Luxemburg had not intended a division of the party, her theoretical reflections put the finger into a wound that would decide the fate of the SPD, namely a struggle between the revolutionary and anti-imperialist forces in the party and its conser-

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<sup>56</sup> Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 34.

<sup>57</sup> Rosa Luxemburg: The Mass Strike (1906). Online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/cho7.htm>.



vative leadership.<sup>58</sup> To prevent the »blind obedience« of the masses in the event of another revolutionary attempt, Luxemburg argued for education that was not only supposed to generate »incitement to fight on the basis of indignant feelings of injustice,«<sup>59</sup> but also provide a form of socialist enlightenment. She would try to achieve this in the following years when she taught at the SPD party school in Berlin.<sup>60</sup> There, she would combine her real revolutionary experiences and her theoretical reflections to strengthen awareness of the class struggle and revolutions as its final expression by the following generation of party members.

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58 Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 41.

59 Dath: *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 36.

60 Scott: *Introduction*, p. 17.



## Against Imperialism and for Revolution

Regardless of her revolutionary experiences and the failure of the Russian Revolution in 1905, Luxemburg kept an open mind and always seemed ready for »possible jumps in history.«<sup>1</sup> Like Engels, she was waiting for a crisis, as this did not mean »collapse, but first and foremost a possibility for progress; crisis meant catharsis as a precondition for the possibility of a future.«<sup>2</sup> While Luxemburg demanded to end all injustice, she was also aware of the fact that absolute justice would be impossible to achieve. She rejected a moral terror that was based on such assumptions, especially with regard to revolutionary processes, for which Luxemburg still believed in the power of the masses, yet at the same time she accepted the limitations related to this hope, or as Volker Caysa worded it: »Of course, injustices should and must be eliminated. Rosa Luxemburg has no doubt about that. But to demand total justice from history or from people is not only illusionary for her, but the beginning of a moral terror, a terror of the virtuous, which, through its totalitarian claim, is unable to achieve exactly what it wants: a society that accepts and understands humans.«<sup>3</sup> Luxemburg explained the problem of the masses in a letter to Mathilde Wurm on 16 February 1917 in similar terms: »Especially since the psyche of the masses always holds within itself, like Thalatta, the eternal sea, all latent possibilities:

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1 Caysa: *Leben als Werk*, p. 23.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

deadly calm and roaring storm, low cowardice and wildest heroism. The mass is always what it must be according to the circumstances of the time, and it is always on the verge of becoming something totally different from what it seems.«<sup>4</sup> This was at the same time the crux for every revolution: it needed the masses, yet the masses were and still are an unreliable force in history. However, Luxemburg, in contrast to others who considered the masses to be a destructive force, believed in their potential. One who focused on the destructive force of the masses was the French physician and psychologist Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931):

Civilisations as yet have only been created and directed by a small intellectual aristocracy, never by crowds. Crowds are only powerful for destruction. Their rule is always tantamount to a barbarian phase. A civilisation involves fixed rules, discipline, a passing from the instinctive to the rational state, forethought for the future, an elevated degree of culture – all of them conditions that crowds, left to themselves, have invariably shown themselves incapable of realising. In consequence of the purely destructive nature of their power crowds act like those microbes which hasten the dissolution of enfeebled or dead bodies. When the structure of a civilisation is rotten, it is always the masses that bring about its downfall.<sup>5</sup>

In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1905, and in contrast to such views, Luxemburg continued to demand the preparation of the revolutionary consciousness of the masses for the next crisis and the application of their potential for the class struggle, especially with regard to possible mass strikes.

After she had returned to Germany, Luxemburg taught at the SPD party school in Berlin between 1907 and 1914 and, of course, continued

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4 Rosa Luxemburg to Mathilde Wurm, Wronke, February 16, 1917, cited in *ibid.*

5 Gustave Le Bon: *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, Kitchener 2001. Online: <https://socserv2.socsci.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3ll3/lebon/Crowds.pdf>, p. 10.

her work as a journalist as well.<sup>6</sup> She had quite an impact as a teacher and was admired by many of her students, and August Bebel praised her as one of the best teachers at the party's institution.<sup>7</sup> The Polish revolutionary, who had just returned from the struggle against the Russian Tsar and the capitalist system, taught national economy, and her style of teaching challenged her students. Luxemburg also made references that reflected her broad level of education and used well-dosed polemical remarks as well. This made her course popular and attracted even »bourgeois social democrats.«<sup>8</sup> She wrote a manuscript that dealt with the topics of the course called »Einführung in die Nationalökonomie« (»Introduction to National Economy«),<sup>9</sup> but it was neither finished nor published, although it was initially supposed to be published in eight brochures in 1909/10. Yet it offers an insight into her thoughts when she began to elaborate the imperialist structures of capitalism that she would deal with and criticize in the years leading up to the First World War. This work also highlights, like many of Luxemburg's other writings, that she continued her critical approach to Marx, yet she at the same time challenged a social democratic course that would lead too far away from his theoretical thoughts as well.<sup>10</sup> In her work she prophetically announced the inevitable end of capitalism and the liberation of the proletariat through revolution:

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- 6 Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 36; Annelies Laschitzka: Rosa Luxemburg und Karl Liebknecht. Ein biographischer Vergleich, in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 215–237, p. 236.
- 7 Michael R. Krätke: Die Aktualität der Rosa Luxemburg, in: Zeitschrift für sozialistische Politik und Wirtschaft 2/2013, pp. 58–61, here p. 58.
- 8 Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 37.
- 9 Rosa Luxemburg: Einführung in die Nationalökonomie, in: GW, vol. 5, pp. 524–778.
- 10 Siegfried Liebing: Rosa Luxemburg: »Einführung in die Nationalökonomie«, in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 71–85, here pp. 71–72.

If it is the task and object of economics to explain the laws of origin, development, and expansion of the capitalist mode of production, it is inevitable that it must, as a further consequence, also expose the laws of the decline of capitalism, which like those of earlier economic forms do not last forever but are only a temporary phase of history, a relay on the infinite ladder of social development. The doctrine of the rise of capitalism logically turns into the doctrine of the fall of capitalism, the science of the mode of production of capital into the scientific foundation of socialism, the theoretical means of the rule of the bourgeoisie into the weapon of the revolutionary class struggle for the liberation of the proletariat.<sup>11</sup>

Luxemburg therefore continued her theoretical reflections about revolutions, although she also had to deal with changes in her personal life.

Kostja Zetkin (1885–1980), Clara Zetkin's son, was Luxemburg's new lover and from 1906 occupied the room Jogiches had been residing in before. However, this led to tension with the latter, who did not want to accept that Luxemburg had moved on. Regardless of this struggle, the two had to continue their working relationship, a situation that was not so easy for Luxemburg, who felt some inconvenience when she and Jogiches traveled to London in 1907 to participate in the Party Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party. Eventually, Luxemburg, against the wishes of Jogiches, returned to Germany alone, where she was arrested and brought to trial for a speech she had given two years before.<sup>12</sup> While in prison, Luxemburg and Zetkin continued their amorous relationship in letter form.<sup>13</sup> However, the relationship with Zetkin ended a few years later, although Luxemburg already explained her feelings: »Through your

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11 Luxemburg: Einführung, pp. 587–588, cited in *ibid.*, p. 74.

12 Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 37–40.

13 Rosa Luxemburg: Die Liebesbriefe, ed. by Jörn Schütrumpf, Berlin 2012, pp. 151–230.

love you forced me to love you, and when your love melted into nothing, mine was over too. It pained me that I did not relieve you of the burden earlier, the memory of the evil and tortured looks of a captive bird pains me, but I never dared to speak the word of redemption, because inwardly I held our relationship as a sacred and serious matter.<sup>14</sup> Her personal relationships obviously did not end happily for Luxemburg, and similarly to her increasingly isolated position within the party, she must have felt more and more alone.

Her arguments for mass strikes and the democratically-based organization of the masses in revolutionary processes also caused accusations that Luxemburg would promote anarchist ideas, although the Polish revolutionary tried to sharply demarcate her own position from anarchist ones.<sup>15</sup> In addition to that problem, Luxemburg had to face the decreasing influence of the left wing of the SPD, where she and Franz Mehring seemed to mark the last stand of the Marxist elements within the party, later joined by Karl Liebknecht when the First World War began.<sup>16</sup> For Luxemburg, the class struggle was a historical necessity and could not simply disappear or be ended through reforms, which is why she, in contrast to many of her party colleagues in the SPD, continued to demand another revolution.<sup>17</sup>

The revolution as such was viewed rather critically by the SPD leadership. When Karl Kautsky published a brochure with the title »Der Weg zur Macht: Politische Betrachtungen über das Hineinwachsen in die Revolution« («The Road to Power: Political Reflections on Growing into the Revolution»), the party leadership withdrew it from sale because its majority was against too open a discussion about revolu-

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14 Letter to Kostja Zetkin, August 17, 1909, cited in Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 41.

15 Schüttrumpf: Zwischen Liebe und Zorn, p. 46.

16 Ibid., p. 40.

17 Rosa Luxemburg: Tolstoi als sozialer Denker (1908), in: Rosa Luxemburg: Friedensutopien und Hundepolitik. Schriften und Reden, 2nd edition, Stuttgart 2018, pp. 7–17 here p. 15.

tionary ideas that could be linked to the party.<sup>18</sup> Instead, they were ambitious about becoming part of the bourgeois leadership of society, or in short: power became more important than socialist ideals.<sup>19</sup> This »decision for a strategic integration into the Wilhelminian society« was one of the first steps on the path that would lead to the approval of war loans in early August 1914.<sup>20</sup> Regardless of Kautsky's experience, he himself broke with Luxemburg in 1910 because the latter demanded mass strikes against capitalism, imperialism, and militarism and thereby challenged Kautsky's interpretations of Marx as well.<sup>21</sup> Helen Scott emphasized that »[t]his conflict marked the end of a long, if progressively more strained, alliance between Kautsky and Luxemburg, and the beginning of censorship of the left in the major party publications.«<sup>22</sup> In an article in the *Dortmunder Arbeiterzeitung* on 14 March 1910, Luxemburg clearly expressed the necessity for a mass strike:

A political mass strike in Germany [...] would exert a far-reaching, long-range effect on the International. It would be a fact which would enhance immeasurably the courage, the belief in socialism, the confidence, the readiness for sacrifice of the proletariat in all countries. To be sure, considerations of this kind cannot be a reason for German Social Democracy and the German trade unions to decide to apply the mass strike; such a strike must be a product of the internal situation in Germany itself. [...] German Social Democracy has until now provided the International with the great model in the areas of parliamentary struggle, organization and party discipline. Perhaps it will soon provide a shining example of how all these advantages can be combined with a resolute and intrepid mass action. Nevertheless it must not be anticipated by any means that one fine

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18 Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 39.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

21 Dath: *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 43; Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, pp. 46–47; Scott: *Introduction*, pp. 20–21.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 21.



day the supreme leadership of the movement, the Party Executive and the General Commission of the trade unions, will give the command to commence the mass strike. Corporate bodies which bear the responsibility for millions are naturally hesitant to pass resolutions which, after all, must be carried out by others. Beyond this, the decision to undertake a direct mass action can originate only in the mass itself. The liberation of the working class can only be the work of the working class itself – this guiding principle from the Communist Manifesto has also the specific meaning that, even within the class party of the proletariat, any great, decisive movement must originate not in the initiative of a handful of leaders, but in the conviction and solidarity of the mass of party supporters.<sup>23</sup>

Luxemburg consequently demanded a guiding and not a leading Social Democratic Party, as it was the masses themselves who represented the truly revolutionary potential. At the same time, Luxemburg and her comrades of the left wing of the SPD were the ones within the party organization who »saw imperialism as the deadly apotheosis of capitalism that could only be countered with revolutionary socialism«<sup>24</sup> and therefore demanded sticking with Marx's and Engels's considerations about class struggle and revolution. She would emphasize this position again in her writings in the following years.

In May 1911, Luxemburg discussed »Peace Utopias« in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*.<sup>25</sup> For her, true peace could only be achieved through the establishment of a socialist society and if

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23 Rosa Luxemburg: Was weiter? in: Dortmunder Arbeiterzeitung, March 14/15, 1910. Online: <https://www.marxists.org/deutsch/archiv/luxemburg/1910/03/weiter.htm>. English text obtained from: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1910/03/15.htm>.

24 Scott: Introduction, p. 22.

25 Rosa Luxemburg, Friedensutopien (1911), in: Rosa Luxemburg, Friedensutopien und Hundepolitik: Schriften und Reden, 2nd edition, Stuttgart 2018, pp. 18–35. English text obtained from: Rosa Luxemburg: Peace Utopias, Leipziger Volkszeitung (May 6 and 8, 1911). <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1911/05/11.htm>.

the friends of peace in bourgeois circles believe that world peace and disarmament can be realised within the frame-work of the present social order, whereas we, who base ourselves on the materialistic conception of history and on scientific socialism, are convinced that militarism can only be abolished from the world with the destruction of the capitalist class state. From this follows the mutual opposition of our tactics in propagating the idea of peace. The bourgeois friends of peace are endeavouring – and from their point of view this is perfectly logical and explicable – to invent all sorts of »practical« projects for gradually restraining militarism, and are naturally inclined to consider every outward apparent sign of a tendency toward peace as the genuine article, to take every expression of the ruling diplomacy in this vein at its word, to exaggerate it into a basis for earnest activity. The Social Democrats, on the other hand, must consider it their duty in this matter, just as in all matters of social criticism, to expose the bourgeois attempts to restrain militarism as pitiful half-measures, and the expressions of such sentiments on the part of the governing circles as diplomatic make-believe, and to oppose the bourgeois claims and pretences with the ruthless analysis of capitalist reality.<sup>26</sup>

Luxemburg could not stand the idea that the SPD of all parties would support the imperialist and militarist course of the German Empire and turn away from Marx's and Engels's legacy to work toward the next revolutionary attempt of the masses to realize the socialist dream.

The class struggle was at the same time not exclusively male, and Luxemburg emphasized the overlap between the fight for women's suffrage and the class struggle. The revolution of the future would need the masses as a whole, not just men. In 1912 she wrote,

Everybody knows that without them, without the enthusiastic help of proletarian women, the Social Democratic Party would not have won the glorious victory of January 12, [1912], would not have obtained four

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26 Ibid.

and a quarter million votes. At any rate, the working class has always had to prove its maturity for political freedom by a successful revolutionary uprising of the masses. Only when Divine Right on the throne and the best and noblest men of the nation actually felt the calloused fist of the proletariat on their eyes and its knee on their chests, only then did they feel confidence in the political »maturity« of the people, and felt it with the speed of lightning. Today, it is the proletarian woman's turn to make the capitalist state conscious of her maturity. This is done through a constant, powerful mass movement which has to use all the means of proletarian struggle and pressure.<sup>27</sup>

Not only did Luxemburg highlight the female role in the revolution of the future, she also pointed to the different roles of women within the class struggle, namely the proletarian women as supporters of the revolutionary effort on the one hand and the bourgeois women as representatives of the counter-revolution on the other. The political awakening of the latter pointed toward change, as »[t]he present forceful movement of millions of proletarian women who consider their lack of political rights a crying wrong is such an infallible sign, a sign that the social bases of the reigning system are rotten and that its days are numbered.«<sup>28</sup> It is impressive that Luxemburg never lost her focus on the revolution, which she also tried to actively prepare by spreading knowledge about its necessity and its role for social change. For her, the demand for women's suffrage was a natural part of her revolutionary agenda, because »[f]ighting for women's suffrage, we will also hasten the coming of the hour when the present society falls in ruins under the hammer strokes of the revolutionary proletariat.«<sup>29</sup>

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27 Rosa Luxemburg, *Frauenwahlrecht und Klassenkampf* (1912), in: Rosa Luxemburg, *Friedensutopien und Hundepolitik: Schriften und Reden*, 2nd edition, Stuttgart 2018, pp. 36–44. English text taken from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1912/05/12.htm>.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

»The Accumulation of Capital,« i. e. Luxemburg's »main theoretical work,«<sup>30</sup> was published in 1913, and it both served as »an important theoretical base for her revolutionary political position«<sup>31</sup> and was based on her theoretical reflections since she had started teaching at the party school in Berlin.<sup>32</sup> With her work, Luxemburg intended to help explain imperialism economically. In it, she not only attacked the theoretical reflections on the topic of Karl Kautsky and Rudolf Hilferding (1877–1941), but also intended to correct some failures by Marx, especially with regard to the second volume of »The Capital.« In the first part, she deals with the latter issue and the problem of the »extended reproduction« of capital and the accumulation of capital on the national and global levels. In the second part, Luxemburg presents the history of the problem she identified before presenting a solution in the third part. Imperialism was consequently an expression of the necessities created by the accumulation of capital in the capitalist centers of the world.<sup>33</sup> She eventually criticized militarism as a by-product of the historical process she intended to explain:

Militarism fulfils a quite definite function in the history of capital, accompanying as it does every historical phase of accumulation. It plays a decisive part in the first stages of European capitalism, in the period of the so-called »primitive accumulation«, as a means of conquering the New World and the spice-producing countries of India. Later, it is employed to

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30 Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 44.

31 Eva Müller: Rosa Luxemburgs Beiträge zur Marxschen Reproduktionstheorie, in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): Rosa Luxemburg, Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 86–100, here p. 100.

32 Paul M. Sweezy: Rosa Luxemburg's »The Accumulation of Capital«, in: *Science & Society* 31/1967, no. 4, pp. 474–485, here p. 474.

33 Krätke: Aktualität, pp. 58–59. On the consequences of these theoretical assumptions and a post-2000 interpretation see Nicos A. Yannacopoulos: Rosa Luxemburg's Theory of Capitalist Catastrophe, in: *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics* 3/1981, no. 3, pp. 452–456.

subject the modern colonies, to destroy the social organisations of primitive societies so that their means of production may be appropriated, forcibly to introduce commodity trade in countries where the social structure had been unfavourable to it, and to turn the natives into a proletariat by compelling them to work for wages in the colonies. It is responsible for the creation and expansion of spheres of interest for European capital in non-European regions, for extorting railway concessions in backward countries, and for enforcing the claims of European capital as international lender. Finally, militarism is a weapon in the competitive struggle between capitalist countries for areas of non-capitalist civilisation.<sup>34</sup>

Modern imperialism was consequently relying on militarism, which is why both needed to be considered, according to Luxemburg, as the consequence of the increasing accumulation of capital in the centers and the exploitation of the colonies at the same time.<sup>35</sup> The latter process was an essential element for the existence of the capitalist world system that Immanuel Wallerstein (1930–2019) would later describe,<sup>36</sup> but which Luxemburg anticipated in her work.<sup>37</sup>

It was nevertheless criticized by many of her contemporaries, including Otto Bauer (1881–1938), to whom Luxemburg replied with a short counter-criticism,<sup>38</sup> which, however, was not published before her death in 1919 but only two years later, and which also did not persuade her critics. Lenin intended to write a review of her book as

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34 Rosa Luxemburg: *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913). Online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1913/accumulation-capital/ch32.htm>.

35 Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 44.

36 Immanuel Wallerstein: *World-Systems Analysis. An Introduction*, Duham, NC 2004.

37 Engelhard: *Die Ökonomen der SPD*, p. 28

38 Rosa Luxemburg: *Die Akkumulation des Kapitals oder Was die Epigonen aus der Marxschen Theorie gemacht haben. Eine Antikritik von Rosa Luxemburg*, Leipzig 1921.

well and chose the title »An Unsuccessful Addition to Marx's Theory by Rosa Luxemburg,« yet he never finished it.<sup>39</sup>

It is not surprising at all that Luxemburg was regularly criticized by men from her own party, as she would regularly put her finger in the wound if her party comrades forgot their revolutionary tasks and began to enjoy their powerful positions within the existent political order. Her criticisms were often taken personally, not only because they were expressed as powerful polemics, but because they were true. In 1913 she not only criticized her party for its stance toward the »Wehrvorlage« (defense bill)<sup>40</sup> and left the editorial board of the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* because the party was unwilling to support a press campaign against it, but she also held speeches in late September at large gatherings in which she requested soldiers to withhold their obedience in the event of war. For the latter, she was brought to trial in Frankfurt in 1914 for »incitement to public disobedience,« and Paul Levi, who would become Luxemburg's third lover, defended her during it.<sup>41</sup> Her defense speech impressed not only Levi but also the court representatives, who nevertheless sentenced Luxemburg to one year in prison. She called her speeches natural social democratic acts of elucidation and again emphasized the mass strike as a stage of the class struggle.<sup>42</sup> That Luxemburg had to go to prison was surprising neither for her friends nor for Luxemburg herself. It was at this moment in time when the lives of Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht began

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39 Wladislaw Hedeler: Nikolai Bucharins Studie über die Akkumulation des Kapitals (1914/1925), in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): Rosa Luxemburg, Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 101–122, here p. 101.

40 Rosa Luxemburg: Die zweite Lesung der Wehrvorlage, in: *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, June 11, 1913.

41 Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, pp. 45–46.

42 Rosa Luxemburg: Verteidigungsrede vor der Frankfurter Strafkammer (1914), in: Rosa Luxemburg, Friedensutopien und Hundepolitik: Schriften und Reden, 2nd edition, Stuttgart 2018, pp. 45–59, here 47 and 58.

to overlap, as the latter, for the first time, energetically condemned the former's sentence in the Prussian House of Representatives.<sup>43</sup>

Luxemburg, who would have even accepted a violent death as the final consequence of her revolutionary activities, did not fear going to prison again, as she considered this experience to be an almost natural part of her life as a political activist.<sup>44</sup> Prison, as Volker Caysa emphasized, was part of the »logic of the struggle« for Luxemburg, and avoiding this logic would have been like treason against her ideals.<sup>45</sup> In a letter to Walter Stoecker (1891–1939) on 11 March 1914, she wrote:

That there are comrades who can assume that I am fleeing Germany because of the prison sentence would amuse me very much, if it were not a little saddening at the same time. Dear young friend, I assure you that I would not flee even if the gallows threatened me, for the simple reason that I consider it absolutely necessary to get our party used to the fact that sacrifice belongs to the craft of the socialist and that it is a matter of course.<sup>46</sup>

Considering these words, the »fall of man«<sup>47</sup> when the SPD approved the war loans in 1914 must have been even more traumatic for Luxemburg, who »from the outset hotly attacked this policy and never forgave the party's leaders for their betrayal of the ideals to which they had once subscribed.«<sup>48</sup> Luxemburg wrote about party discipline on 4 December 1914:

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43 Laschitzka: Rosa Luxemburg und Karl Liebknecht, p. 218.

44 Caysa, *Leben als Werk*, p. 10.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

46 Rosa Luxemburg to Walter Stoecker, Marxh 11, 1914 cited in *ibid.*, p. 31.

47 Frank Jacob/Riccardo Altieri: *Der Erste Weltkrieg, Geschichtsrevisionismus und der »Sündenfall« der deutschen Sozialdemokratie*, in: Frank Jacob/Riccardo Altieri (Eds.): *Krieg und Frieden im Spiegel des Sozialismus 1914–1918*, Berlin 2018, pp. 9–29.

48 Carsten: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 273. Also see H. Schurer: *Some Reflections on Rosa Luxemburg and the Bolshevik Revolution*, in: *The Slavonic and East European Review* 40/1962, no. 95, pp. 356–372, here p. 358.

What the compulsion of the law is for every citizen and soldier is the binding force of the party program for every social democrat. And no group of a hundred comrades, be it a local assembly, a consumer association, or a parliamentary faction, has the power in a democratic party like the Social Democrats to force the individual to betray the party. The discipline of the whole party, i. e. in relation to their program, takes precedence over all corporate discipline and can only give this latter justification, just as it forms its natural barrier.<sup>49</sup>

While Liebknecht, due to his decision not to comply with the party leadership's demand to comply, became the »living symbol of war resistance,«<sup>50</sup> the SPD's left wing was shrinking more and more to become nothing more than a small sect within the party.<sup>51</sup> Opponents of the war and the majority of the Social Democratic Party and its leaders rallied around Luxemburg and Liebknecht, but the party's unity was unrestorable, although the split did not occur until 1917 when the SPD divided into the Majority Social Democratic Party of Germany (MSPD) and the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD).<sup>52</sup>

Although there were only a few »old comrades« like Franz Mehring who continued their close political relationship with Luxemburg during the First World War,<sup>53</sup> she did not give in. She continued her protests for as long as she found a way to get them published through her friends, and together with Mehring and Zetkin, she formed the

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49 Rosa Luxemburg: Parteidisziplin, December 4, 1914, in: GW, vol. 4, p. 16, cited in Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 50.

50 Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 49.

51 Schütrumpf: Zwischen Liebe und Zorn, p. 50.

52 Uli Schöler/Thilo Scholle (Eds.). Weltkrieg – Spaltung – Revolution. Sozialdemokratie 1916–1922, Bonn 2018.

53 Werner Conze: Die Befestigung der KPD-Tradition durch Mehring und Rosa Luxemburg, in: Historische Zeitschrift 188/1959, no. 1, pp. 76–82, here p. 76.



International Group (Gruppe Internationale) that would later turn into the Spartacus League.<sup>54</sup> Luxemburg would spend most of the war in prison, but she was never really uninformed about current events. She had access to books and newspapers and, through texts, tried to intervene in daily politics.<sup>55</sup> In prison, Luxemburg wrote not only the famous »Junius Pamphlet« (1916)<sup>56</sup> but also her important and probably most cited work about the Russian Revolution, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

In May 1916, her leaflet »Dog Politics« was published, in which she criticized the betrayal of social democratic values by the party leadership: »What was said a thousand times over in Social-Democratic newspapers, in Social-Democratic election meetings, in Social-Democratic Reichstag speeches, is today treason. The whole 50 years of activity of Social-Democracy, which was directed against war, militarism, class rule, class solidarity [with the bourgeoisie], national unity, and patriotic platitudes, is treason!«<sup>57</sup> Luxemburg also emphasized that Parliament would no longer be representing the interests of the people, but the interests of the imperialist elites: »Now it has to be clear to each man and woman of the people that this parliament, this horde of Mamluks from Payer to David is dismissed and finished in the eyes of the court of world history. Only the self-activity of the masses, only the bold initiative of the masses, only insistent action of class struggle on the entire front can lead the way for us to bring an end to genocide, military dictatorship, and the slow starvation of the

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54 Scott: Introduction, 23.

55 Letter to Sophie Liebknecht, Breslau, August 2, 1917, in: Luxemburg: Briefe aus dem Gefängnis, pp. 73–78, here p. 73

56 Rosa Luxemburg: The Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis of German Social Democracy (1915). Online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/>.

57 Rosa Luxemburg: Hundepolitik (1916), in: Rosa Luxemburg, Friedensutopien und Hundepolitik: Schriften und Reden, 2nd edition, Stuttgart 2018, pp. 60–64, here p. 62. English text was taken from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1916/05/dogpolitics.html>.

people.«<sup>58</sup> She again demanded that the masses become active against the war and against the moral corruption of the ideas that were supposed to be the foundation of the SPD's political actions. The time seemed to be ripe for another revolution.

In addition to her political works, Luxemburg sent numerous letters from prison, which are almost »poetic contemporary documents,«<sup>59</sup> and show »human pathos close to expressionism.«<sup>60</sup> They show her human side, as Luxemburg is writing about a lot of things as well as her emotions that at first glance seem to be apolitical. Yet they also highlight that Luxemburg »kept her composure« and did not despair.<sup>61</sup> Although she sometimes felt like an imprisoned animal,<sup>62</sup> she maintained her hope to soon die on the revolutionary barricades.<sup>63</sup> Stoically, she accepted the necessity of the historical course, which, according to her understanding, had to include suffering and sorrow. Asked by Sophie Liebknecht about the meaning of life and why things were so bad, Luxemburg replied with the following:

»Why is everything like this?« You child, life has always been »like this,« everything belongs to it: suffering and separation and longing. You always have to take everything and find that everything is nice and good. At least that's what I do. Not through ingenious foresight, but simply by my nature. I instinctively feel that this is the only right way to take life, so I feel really happy in any situation. I also do not want to miss anything in my life or have anything different from what it was and is.<sup>64</sup>

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58 Ibid., 63.

59 Vorwort, in: Luxemburg: Briefe aus dem Gefängnis, pp. 5–7, here 5.

60 Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 53.

61 Caysa, *Leben als Werk*, p. 15.

62 Letter to Sophie Liebknecht, Wronke, January 15, 1917, in: Luxemburg: Briefe aus dem Gefängnis, pp. 20–23, here p. 21. Also see: Letter to Sophie Liebknecht, Wronke, May 2, 1917, in: Luxemburg: Briefe aus dem Gefängnis, pp. 36–42, here p. 40.

63 Ibid.

64 Letter to Sophie Liebknecht, Wronke, April 19, 1917, pp. 30–34, here p. 31.

What nevertheless sparked Luxemburg's hope that humanity would eventually be able to overcome all sorrows and the exploitation of the masses for the prosperity of a few was the Russian Revolution in 1917. She would, like those in German politics during the war, not only observe but critically think and reflect on it. She feared that the (world) revolution would fail »because social democracy in the highly developed West consists of wretched cowards, and will let the Russians, quietly watching, bleed to death.«<sup>65</sup> That it would be Lenin and the Bolsheviki who were responsible for the corruption of the revolutionary process was something Luxemburg could only guess at, although her previous work on the Russian Revolution had criticized the issues Luxemburg had already been able to identify, and this needs to be discussed in some more detail now.

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65 Rosa Luxemburg to Luise Kautsky, November 24, 1917, cited in Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, pp. 54–55.



## The Russian Revolution in 1917

The Russian Revolution in 1917 sparked not only Luxemburg's hopes for world revolution but also the dreams for an *ex oriente lux* among many left intellectuals of her time.<sup>1</sup> The revolutionary events in Russia also pointed toward the First World War nearing its end, and global protest movements against the war seemed to emphasize the potential for a world revolution.<sup>2</sup> Luxemburg herself also considered the events to continue the revolution of 1905,<sup>3</sup> especially since she had emphasized in her writings related to these events that the revolutionary process would be continued at a later moment in time. When she heard the news about the Russian Revolution in 1917 while still in prison, Luxemburg was excited. In a letter to Hans Diefenbach (1884–1917) from March, she wrote: »You can imagine what a turmoil [the news from] Russia has stirred within me. So many old friends who have been languishing in prison for years in Moscow, in St Petersburg, Orel or Riga are now walking around free. How much that lightens the

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- 1 For a broader perspective see Frank Jacob/Riccardo Altieri (Eds.): *Die Wahrnehmung der Russischen Revolutionen 1917. Zwischen utopischen Träumen und erschütterter Ablehnung*, Berlin 2019.
  - 2 Francis L. Carsten: *Revolutionary Situations in Europe 1917–1920*, in: Francis L. Carsten: *Essays in German History*, London 2003, pp. 283–293, here p. 283. For the global perspective see Bois/Jacob (Eds.): *Zeiten des Aufbruchs (1916–1921)*.
  - 3 Rosa Luxemburg: *Zur russischen Revolution (1918)*, in: *GW*, vol. 4, pp. 332–365, here p. 336

burden for me sitting here! ... I am content with it and do not begrudge them their freedom even if my chances have become so much the worse as a direct result.«<sup>4</sup> However, and not only because she was imprisoned, »the revolution was personal, organizational and theoretical, with those aspects often hard to untangle from each other.«<sup>5</sup> She was still, regardless of her former experiences, convinced that a successful revolution was possible and could not only end the slaughtering of the First World War but also lay the ground for a better world built according to the values of a democratic socialism, especially since the »concept of freedom remained central and galvanizing.«<sup>6</sup>

Luxemburg expressed these hopes in a letter to Sophie Liebknecht (1884–1964) in mid-November 1917: »[D]espite all the terrible things going on in the world. You know [...], the longer it takes and the more the wicked and monstrous things that happen every day exceed all limits and dimensions, the calmer and firmer I become inwardly, as one cannot apply moral standards towards an element, a blizzard [buran], a flood of water, a solar eclipse, but must just consider them as something given, as an object of research and knowledge.«<sup>7</sup> Luxemburg had come to the conclusion that it made no sense to resist against the whole of humanity, but instead had to follow the course of history without losing one's own direction. In addition, she felt that the revolution was near: »I have the feeling that all of this moral mud through which we wade, this great lunatic asylum in which we live, can suddenly and overnight, as if through a magic wand, turn into the opposite, into something enormously great and heroic, and – if the

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4 Letter to Hans Diefenbach, March 1917, in: *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, eds. Georg Adler, Peter Hudis and Annelies Laschitzka, trans. George Shriver, London 2013, p. 381, cited in Mills: *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 138.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 138

6 *Ibid.*

7 Letter to Sophie Liebknecht, mid-November 1917, in: *Luxemburg: Briefe aus dem Gefängnis*, pp. 87–94, here p. 88.

war will last a few more years – *must* turn.«<sup>8</sup> The war would, according to Luxemburg's considerations, inevitably lead to revolution and wash away everything to create a new and better world.<sup>9</sup> It was therefore only necessary to survive these few fatal years and to keep up the hope for the future but not so distant revolution.<sup>10</sup>

When the first news about the revolutionary events eventually arrived in Germany, Luxemburg was happy, but also careful not to join a theoretical debate too early and without proper information about the actual developments.<sup>11</sup> She tried to remain calm and read the news carefully, as she was never really cut off from the events and was fully aware of what was happening in the world outside of her prison cell.<sup>12</sup> An event that really shocked her, however, was the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, as it made agents of German imperialism out of Lenin and his revolutionary politics. The »union of the Bolsheviks with Germany« was perceived as a »scary ghost«<sup>13</sup> as it turned the defense of revolutionary ideals into a surrender and eventually support for the counter-revolution. Luxemburg was sure that only the »proletarian world revolution«<sup>14</sup> could end the war, not a separate peace with the forces of capitalism, imperialism, and militarism. In her article »The Russian Tragedy« (1918),<sup>15</sup> Luxemburg would consequently harshly criticize the peace treaty:

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8 Ibid., pp. 88–89.

9 Ibid., p. 89.

10 Letter to Sophie Liebknecht, [Breslau,] November 24, 1917, in: Luxemburg: Briefe aus dem Gefängnis, pp. 95–99, here pp. 96–97.

11 Letter to Sophie Liebknecht, Breslau, mid-December 1917, in: Luxemburg: Briefe aus dem Gefängnis, pp. 100–108, here p. 100.

12 See Jörn Schütrumpf (Ed.), *Diktatur statt Sozialismus. Die russische Revolution und die deutsche Linke 1917/18*, Berlin 2017.

13 Rosa Luxemburg: *Brennende Zeitfragen*, GW, vol. 4, p. 278.

14 Ibid., 277.

15 Rosa Luxemburg: *Die russische Tragödie*, in: Jörn Schütrumpf (Ed.): *Diktatur statt Sozialismus. Die russische Revolution und die deutsche Linke*

Their [the Bolsheviks'] decision was dictated by two revolutionary viewpoints: by the unshakable faith in the European revolution of the proletariat as the sole way out and the inevitable consequence of the world war, and by their equally unshakable resolve to defend by any means possible the power they had gained in Russia, in order to use it for the most energetic and radical changes. And yet these calculations largely overlooked the most crucial factor, namely German militarism, to which Russia surrendered unconditionally through the separate peace. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was in reality *nothing but the capitulation of the revolutionary Russian proletariat to German militarism*.<sup>16</sup>

Luxemburg continued her sharp evaluation of the peace treaty when she outlined its consequences for the Russian Revolution and the international proletariat alike:

[T]his has meant a number of things. In the first place, the strangulation of the revolution and the victory of the counter-revolution in the revolutionary strongholds of Russia. [...]

Secondly, this means the isolation of the Great Russian part of the revolutionary terrain from the grain-growing and coal-mining region and from the sources of iron-ore and naphtha, that is, from the most important and vital economic resources of the revolution.

Thirdly, the encouragement and strengthening of all counter-revolutionary elements within Russia, thus enabling them to offer the strongest resistance to the Bolsheviks and their measures.

Fourthly, Germany will play the role of arbiter in Russia's political and economic relation with all of its own provinces: Finland, Lithuania, the Ukraine and the Caucasus, as well as with the neighbors, for example Rumania.

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1917/18, Berlin 2017, pp. 358–364. English text obtained from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/09/11.htm>. My emphasis.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



The overall result of this unrestricted and unlimited German power over Russia was naturally an enormous strengthening of German imperialism both internally and externally, and thereby of course a heightening of the white-hot resistance and war-readiness of the Entente powers, i. e. prolongation and intensification of the world war.<sup>17</sup>

Although her article was published in the *Spartakusbriefe* (Spartacus Letters) in September 1918, editor Ernst Meyer (1887–1930) published Luxemburg's discussion together with an editorial notice that relativized her criticism.<sup>18</sup>

The imprisoned Luxemburg was furious about this procedure and wrote another article that was not accepted by Meyer for publication at all, which is why she eventually decided to work on a full-length manuscript about the Russian Revolution. The basis for this work was articles from German and Russian newspapers and brochures about the events. It was friends who provided her with those materials, and Luxemburg was as well informed in prison as anyone else would have been in freedom.<sup>19</sup> So, eventually, the revolutionary intellectual worked on her reflections about yet another revolution and the politics of Lenin and the Bolsheviki who had supposedly taken over its process and progress. The manuscript remained unfinished and was not published before 1922 in an edition by Paul Levi (1883–1930). American historian Eric D. Weitz has highlighted that, »[w]ritten within months of the Bolshevik Revolution and while she still languished in prison, the oft-cited passages [from the manuscript] offer some of the finest expressions of her democratic sensibilities.«<sup>20</sup> Weitz continues his evaluation of the text by pointing out that Luxemburg »provided a vision of a participatory socialism that echoed the hu-

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17 Ibid.

18 Laschitza: Im Lebensrausch, pp. 570–571.

19 Rosa Luksemburg: Rukopis o russkoi rewoluzii, in: Woprossy istorii (Moskau), Nr. 2, Februar 1919, S. 3–33, cited in Laschitza: Im Lebensrausch, p. 571.

20 Weitz: »Rosa Luxemburg Belongs to Us!«, p. 27.

manism of the early Marx, and a sweeping critique of bureaucratic socialism that many subsequent commentators have lauded for its predictive powers.«<sup>21</sup> Of course, the Polish revolutionary was involved not only theoretically but also emotionally, as she had hoped for another revolution to end the war and to pave the way to socialism.

Nevertheless, and maybe due to the fact that Luxemburg herself would not witness the further rise of Leninism and Stalinism in later years, her work was ambivalent, in the sense that it praised the revolutionary initiative of the Bolsheviki but at the same time criticized some of their activities, e.g. their dealings with the national question and the private land ownership of the peasants.<sup>22</sup> Luxemburg was well aware that there would be no easy way toward revolution and that, as German historian Manfred Kossok later worded it, »no revolution remains a nice revolution.«<sup>23</sup> However, she could not hold back her criticism considering that the Bolsheviki had neither established socialism nor the dictatorship of the proletariat, but, if anything, only a caricature of the latter.<sup>24</sup> She criticized the terror, and her acts, as Annelies Laschitza emphasized, »sprang from her absolute solidarity with the Russian Revolution as the most formidable fact in world history and from her concern for the fate of the world revolutionary process of liberation from imperialism and war.«<sup>25</sup> Like Kautsky, who in contrast to Luxemburg could actually participate in the public discussion about the revolution,<sup>26</sup> Luxemburg focused on the relationship between democracy and dictatorship while being convinced »that so-

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21 Ibid.

22 Kalbe: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 190.

23 Manfred Kossok: Requiem auf die schöne Revolution, in: Manfred Kossok: Sozialismus an der Peripherie. Späte Schriften, ed. by Jörn Schüttrumpf, Berlin 2016, pp. 23–28, here p. 25.

24 Letter to Julian Marchlewski, September 30, 1918, cited in Laschitza: Im Lebensrausch, p. 573.

25 Ibid., p. 574.

26 Karl Kautsky: Demokratie oder Diktatur, Berlin 1918. On the discourse Jacob: 1917, pp. 149–202.

cialism could only succeed if it emerged from a world revolutionary upheaval and if it were the work of the popular masses.«<sup>27</sup>

In *The Russian Revolution*, Luxemburg emphasized that the world could now observe its first experiment with the »dictatorship of the proletariat«:

Clearly, not uncritical apologetics but penetrating and thoughtful criticism is alone capable of bringing out treasures of experiences and teachings. Dealing as we are with the very first experiment in proletarian dictatorship in world history (and one taking place at that under the hardest conceivable conditions, in the midst of the world-wide conflagration and chaos of the imperialist mass slaughter, caught in the coils of the most reactionary military power in Europe, and accompanied by the most complete failure on the part of the international working class), it would be a crazy idea to think that every last thing done or left undone in an experiment with the dictatorship of the proletariat under such abnormal conditions represented the very pinnacle of perfection. On the contrary, elementary conceptions of socialist politics and an insight into their historically necessary prerequisites force us to understand that under such fatal conditions even the most gigantic idealism and the most storm-tested revolutionary energy are incapable of realizing democracy and socialism but only distorted attempts at either.<sup>28</sup>

Luxemburg therefore demanded critical studies of the Russian revolutionary process, as both German and international workers could learn a lot from it.<sup>29</sup> Further on, she does not paint a positivistic image of the revolution, but she made it clear that »[t]he ›golden mean‹ can-

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27 Laschitzka: *Im Lebensrausch*, p. 575.

28 Rosa Luxemburg: *Die Russische Revolution. Eine kritische Würdigung*, ed. and introd. by Paul Levi, Berlin 1922, pp. 70–71. English text obtained from: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/russian-revolution/cho1.htm>.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

not be maintained in any revolution. The law of its nature demands a quick decision: either the locomotive drives forward full steam ahead to the most extreme point of the historical ascent, or it rolls back of its own weight again to the starting point at the bottom; and those who would keep it with their weak powers half way up the hill, it drags down with it irredeemably into the abyss.«<sup>30</sup> She valued the Bolsheviks' decision to take power into their own hands and to establish the »dictatorship of the proletariat.«<sup>31</sup> Luxemburg emphasized in this regard that the »October uprising was not only the actual salvation of the Russian Revolution; it was also the salvation of the honor of international socialism.«<sup>32</sup>

In addition, Luxemburg was willing to accept the conditions under which the revolutionary process developed in Russia, writing that

It would be a sorry jest indeed to demand or expect of Lenin and his comrades that, in the brief period of their rule, in the center of the gripping whirlpool of domestic and foreign struggles, ringed about by countless foes and opponents – to expect that under such circumstances they should already have solved, or even tackled, one of the most difficult tasks, indeed, we can safely say, *the* most difficult task of the socialist transformation of society! Even in the West, under the most favorable conditions, once we have come to power, we too will break many a tooth on this hard nut before we are out of the worst of the thousands of complicated difficulties of this gigantic task!<sup>33</sup>

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30 Ibid., p. 80.

31 Ibid., p. 81. On the term and its political implications in Soviet Russia and the early Soviet Union see Mike Schmeitzner: Lenin und die Diktatur des Proletariats. Begriff, Konzeption, Ermöglichung, in: Totalitarismus und Demokratie. Zeitschrift für Internationale Diktatur- und Freiheitsforschung 14/2017, no. 1, pp. 17–69.

32 Luxemburg: Die Russische Revolution, p. 81.

33 Ibid., p. 84.

However, and regardless of this praise, Luxemburg also criticized some elements of Bolshevik policies as being anti-socialist, especially, and as mentioned before, the questions related to nationalism and land possession.<sup>34</sup> What was missing from Luxemburg's point of view were two things she had previously defined as essential for every revolutionary process, namely enlightenment in the sense of education for the masses and absolute freedom for everyone. She argued that education would be »the most essential thing: bourgeois class rule has no need of the political training and education of the entire mass of the people, at least not beyond certain narrow limits. But for the proletarian dictatorship that is the life element, the very air without which it is not able to exist.«<sup>35</sup> And in probably her most often cited quote of the work, she demanded freedom: »Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party – however numerous they may be – is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently. Not because of any fanatical concept of ›justice‹ but because all that is instructive, wholesome and purifying in political freedom depends on this essential characteristic, and its effectiveness vanishes when ›freedom‹ becomes a special privilege.«<sup>36</sup>

This, however, was not simple lip service but »very serious« (*bitter-ernst*) for her, as Jörn Schütrumpf has highlighted, and »not for reasons of shallow morality or stupid suicidal fairness. It was really about freedom for all sides, and not just about freedom ›for the revolutionary class,‹ for the workers.«<sup>37</sup> An »emancipation with anti-emancipatory means«<sup>38</sup> was unthinkable for Luxemburg. Freedom for all was ultimately the *conditio sine qua non* for Luxemburg's revolution theory, and in revolutionary practice she would not accept a corruption

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34 Ibid., p. 84–106.

35 Ibid., p. 108.

36 Ibid., p. 109.

37 Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 65.

38 Ibid., p. 66.

of the revolutionary process by any kind of minority. Regardless of these considerations, the Luxemburgian idea of freedom was often perverted after her death to fit a cause or claim.<sup>39</sup> German scholar Michael Brie therefore pointed out three elements of Luxemburg's *ultima ratio*: »1. freedom that is not a universal freedom for each individual is not freedom but a privilege, of few or of many. [...] 2. Freedom is a precondition for modern social progress. [...] 3. Freedom is always the freedom of the dissenter.«<sup>40</sup> Those who did not respect the precondition of freedom during a revolutionary process acted against democratic and socialist values.<sup>41</sup>

Lenin might have realized that the centuries of degradation of the masses could not simply be reverted in an instant, but Luxemburg criticized the methods the leader of the Bolsheviki had chosen to imply the socialist change, because, as Luxemburg emphasized, neither Kautsky's idea of democracy nor Lenin's idea of dictatorship complied with truly socialist politics.<sup>42</sup> What would ultimately remain in place in Soviet Russia was simply a dictatorship by a small group of party members, led and further centralized by Lenin.

In place of the representative bodies created by general, popular elections, Lenin and Trotsky have laid down the soviets as the only true representation of political life in the land as a whole, life in the soviets must also become more and more crippled. Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life,

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39 Michael Brie: *Die Freiheit ist immer die Freiheit der anderen. Zur sozialphilosophischen Dimension von Rosa Luxemburgs Kritik an den Bolschewiki*, in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): *Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes*, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 66–69, here p. 66.

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 66–67.

41 Brie: *Rosa Luxemburgs Symphonie*, p. 2.

42 Luxemburg: *Die Russische Revolution*, p. 115.

in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element. Public life gradually falls asleep, a few dozen party leaders of inexhaustible energy and boundless experience direct and rule. Among them, in reality only a dozen outstanding heads do the leading and an elite of the working class is invited from time to time to meetings where they are to applaud the speeches of the leaders, and to approve proposed resolutions unanimously – at bottom, then, a clique affair – a dictatorship, to be sure, not the dictatorship of the proletariat but only the dictatorship of a handful of politicians, that is a dictatorship in the bourgeois sense, in the sense of the rule of the Jacobins (the postponement of the Soviet Congress from three-month periods to six-month periods!) Yes, we can go even further: such conditions must inevitably cause a brutalization of public life: attempted assassinations, shooting of hostages, etc.<sup>43</sup>

Lenin's Bolsheviki had consequently turned out to be a Blanquist party rather than a social democratic party whose task it would be to guide the masses to their own revolutionary potential, to help them to seek freedom and power on their own. Luxemburg therefore considered the revolution per se to be a mighty teacher for the masses, as each revolutionary process would lead them to realize their own capabilities. Therefore, the purpose of any revolutionary party activity should be nothing more than activating the masses' revolutionary conscience. Instead, Lenin and the Bolsheviki limited the freedom of the masses in the post-revolutionary order that had been established in post-revolutionary Russia.<sup>44</sup> Schütrumpf is right when he considers Luxemburg's idea of a revolution to be an organic one in which the

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43 Rosa Luxemburg: *The Russian Revolution* (1918). Online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/russian-revolution/cho6.htm>, ch. 6.

44 Wolfgang Fritz Haug: *Revolutionärer Determinismus? Notiz zum Fokus der Luxemburgschen Dialektik*, in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): *Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes*, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 53–65, here pp. 60–61; Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 70.

revolutionary potential had to react like a body that united the full potential of the masses to move as a whole, and the revolution as such would grow out of the revolutionary experiences of the past.<sup>45</sup> Luxemburg's work about the Russian Revolution was consequently also a »passionate plea for a socialist democracy in which the masses act as an independent revolutionary subject – supported by the party, but not dominated.«<sup>46</sup> At the end of her prison time in Germany in late 1918, she hoped that this revolutionary project could probably still be successful,<sup>47</sup> although she had realized and emphasized that the revolution would react according to its own dynamics and could not just be »initiated.«<sup>48</sup> This would become one of the problems Luxemburg would have to face during the German Revolution of 1918/19 as well.

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45 Ibid., p. 70–71.

46 Kemmerer: Rosakind, p. 45.

47 Letter to Sophie Liebknecht, Breslau, October 18, 1918, in: Luxemburg: Briefe aus dem Gefängnis, p. 131.

48 Laschitzka: Im Lebensrausch, pp. 576–577.



## The Murder of a Revolutionary

It is a tragedy of history that one of the most vivid and active opponents of imperialism and war was murdered by the militarist forces she had warned the world of for decades. It is in a way something Luxemburg would not have avoided, considering that she had expressed her hope to die on the barricades during a revolution at some point in her life. Yet she would have probably wished to do so to secure the success of the revolutionary process. It was her criticism of the SPD position towards the war, most famously expressed in the »Junius Pamphlet« which her friend Mathilde Jacob (1873–1943) had smuggled out of prison, that brought her again into the crosshairs of the anti-revolutionary forces that were rather interested in power than political principles. Luxemburg had, nevertheless, still participated in political events, albeit indirectly and from afar.<sup>1</sup> The German Revolution,<sup>2</sup> which began with the uprising of sailors in Kiel who disobeyed orders,<sup>3</sup> would provide Luxemburg with yet another revolutionary opportunity in her life, although it would end it as well. In 1918, before the war had ended, Luxemburg hoped that the German

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1 David Fernbach: *Memories of Spartacus: Mathilde Jacob and Wolfgang Fernbach*, in: *History Workshop Journal* 48/1999, pp. 202–221, here p. 207.

2 Dath: *Rosa Luxemburg*, pp. 56–61.

3 Christian Lübcke: *Sechs Tage im November. Eine Rekonstruktion des Kieler Matrosenaufstandes und seiner Verbreitung in Schleswig Holstein*, in: *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Schleswig-Holsteinische Geschichte* 143–144/2018–2019), pp. 171–215.

workers would rise in revolution against the militarist German regime, especially since she considered the coming of the revolution as some kind of fulfillment of a natural law of history, which could not be prevented by reactionary actions.<sup>4</sup> With regard to her interpretation of human history's processes, Luxemburg was still a believer in Marx's historical materialism.

However, as recent studies have shown with regard to the local level, the revolution in Germany was quite diverse and did not follow a predetermined course, but the existent conditions determined the grade of violence and the intensity between the pro- and counter-revolutionary forces.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the beginning of the Weimar Republic, as Mark Jones has shown in his important study, was accompanied by violence that would become an essential aspect of the interwar years and German history after the revolution in 1918.<sup>6</sup> The eruption was made possible by the split of social democracy, as Friedrich Ebert (1871–1925) and his supporters, who determined the political course of the provisional government, represented in the Council of the People's Deputies between November 1918 and February 1919, used the threat of the revolution of the masses to gain power and influence and yet, at the same time, also tried to prevent the revolutionary process from developing further and according to more radical ideas for social change. Luxemburg considered this decision by the party majority the final diversion of the SPD from Marx's ideas. The class struggle would eventually be expressed by a civil war, especially since socialism could not be introduced by a parliamentary

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4 Rosa Luxemburg: *Der Katastrophe entgegen* (1918), in: Rosa Luxemburg: *Friedensutopien und Hundepolitik: Schriften und Reden*, 2nd edition, Stuttgart 2018, pp. 70–74, here p. 74.

5 Frank Jacob: *Revolution und Räterepublik in Unterfranken. Eine landesgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu Verlauf und Folgen der Revolution von 1918/19 an der bayerischen Peripherie*, Würzburg 2019.

6 Mark Jones, *Am Anfang war Gewalt. Die deutsche Revolution 1918/19 und der Beginn der Weimarer Republik*, Berlin 2017.

procedure and an election, but only through a revolution of the masses.<sup>7</sup> What she and others who would eventually establish the German Communist Party (KPD) misinterpreted at this moment in time was the role of the workers, who in their majority were not interested in a continuation of the revolutionary process but rather political consolidation and a return to normal circumstances.<sup>8</sup> The problem of all revolutions, namely the decision of the masses to stop their actions once the immediate aims – in the German case, the end of the war and the abdication of the people responsible, i. e. the monarch – had been reached, was realized too late by Luxemburg and Liebknecht, who believed that the revolutionary locomotive should go way beyond the changes achieved in November 1918.

On the other hand, »[t]he ruling class effectively looked to the MSPD for its survival, and the key social democratic leaders ... consciously opposed the revolution from its start.«<sup>9</sup> Due to this decision, and due to Ebert's demand for the MSPD to fill the existent power vacuum after the war, the position of the military elites was strengthened by closing ranks with the social democratic leadership, whose representatives repressed parts of the workers' movement to gain power in the new order.<sup>10</sup> The KPD that had formed in December 1918/January 1919<sup>11</sup> consequently represented an antagonistic position, demanding an intensification of the class struggle. The similarities to the Russian Revolution in 1917 seemed obvious and increased the fears of a Bolshevization of Germany, fears that would, together with antisemitism, amalgamate in a Judeo-Bolshevist narrative, i. e.

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7 Winkler: *Nachdenken*, p. 12.

8 Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 94.

9 Scott: *Introduction*, p. 27.

10 Stephen Eric Bronner: *Imagining the Possible. Radical Politics for Conservative Times*, London 2002, p. 26.

11 Hermann Weber: *Der Gründungsparteitag der KPD*, Frankfurt am Main 1969.

that Jewish revolutionaries like Luxemburg would intend to destroy Germany.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to such narratives, the KPD discussed its own aims,<sup>13</sup> which Luxemburg outlined in *Die Rote Fahne* in December 1918:

Means of production have been destroyed on a monstrous scale. Millions of able workers, the finest and strongest sons of the working class, slaughtered. Awaiting the survivors' return stands the leering misery of unemployment. Famine and disease threaten to sap the strength of the people at its root. The financial bankruptcy of the state, due to the monstrous burdens of the war debt, is inevitable. Out of all this bloody confusion, this yawning abyss, there is no help, no escape, no rescue other than socialism. Only the revolution of the world proletariat can bring order into this chaos, can bring work and bread for all, can end the reciprocal slaughter of the peoples, can restore peace, freedom, true culture to this martyred humanity. Down with the wage system! That is the slogan of the hour! Instead of wage labor and class rule there must be collective labor. The means of production must cease to be the monopoly of a single class; they must become the common property of all. No more exploiters and exploited! Planned production and distribution of the product in the common interest. Abolition not only of the contemporary mode of production, mere exploitation and robbery, but equally of contemporary commerce, mere fraud.<sup>14</sup>

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12 Frank Jacob: The Semiotic Construction of Judeo-Bolshevism in Germany, 1918–1933, in: Frank Jacob (Ed.): *War and Semiotics. Signs, Communication Systems, and the Preparation, Legitimization, and Commemoration of Collective Mass Violence*, London 2020, pp. 106–127.

13 Benjamin Franz: Zur Diskussion in der KPD 1918/1919 um die Anwendung von Waffengewalt in der Revolution, in: *JahrBuch für Forschungen zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* 8/2009, no. 1, pp. 79–95, here pp. 80–81.

14 Rosa Luxemburg: What Does the Spartacus League Want? (1918). Online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/12/14.htm>.

She consequently stated that the revolution was not finished yet, but also highlighted that it would not be in need of violent means to create a better world for all:

The proletarian revolution requires no terror for its aims; it hates and despises killing. It does not need these weapons because it does not combat individuals but institutions, because it does not enter the arena with naïve illusions whose disappointment it would seek to revenge. It is not the desperate attempt of a minority to mold the world forcibly according to its ideal, but the action of the great massive millions of the people, destined to fulfill a historic mission and to transform historical necessity into reality.<sup>15</sup>

All in all, Luxemburg simply demanded what she had been demanding in the years before: the involvement of the masses to drive the revolution as far as possible in order to secure as many changes in line with socialist demands as possible. She assumed that only such further revolutionary development could »enable a negotiation of conflicts of interest between different social and political forces,«<sup>16</sup> something that had not been possible in the German Empire, where the capitalist elites held all the power, and something that now seemed to be impossible again, as the majority of the SPD did not seem interested in using the opportunities that lay at hand.<sup>17</sup> It was therefore the »revolutionary locomotive« that needed to pick up speed to secure the way toward as many social changes and socialist ideas as possible. The radicalization of the revolution was consequently, according to Luxemburg, a necessity to secure its achievements against the counter-revolutionary forces that would eventually try to revert its

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15 Ibid.

16 Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 77.

17 The revolution was therefore later considered to have been a missed chance for further social changes. Reinhard Rürup: *Revolution und Demokrati-egründung. Studien zur deutschen Geschichte 1918/19*, Göttingen 2020.

achievements, at least partially.<sup>18</sup> In short, Luxemburg did not believe in the permanent success of the revolution, which was why it needed to change as much as possible in the here and now, to secure at least some change despite the later rule of non-revolutionary or even counter-revolutionary forces.

In the fight against the latter, she accepted the use of violence, although only to defend the revolution against its enemies.<sup>19</sup> On 20 November 1918, in an article about the National Assembly, Luxemburg highlighted the following with regard to revolution and its inherent potential civil war:

We shall discuss neither in the national assembly nor about the national assembly with the warders of the capitalists' safes. [...] [T]hey want to spare themselves the revolution, the use of force, the civil war with all its horrors. Petit-bourgeois illusions! They imagine that the mightiest revolution since the beginning of mankind will develop in such a form that the various social classes will come together, engage in a pleasant, calm and »dignified« discussion with each other, and will afterwards hold a vote, perhaps even one with a famous »division.«<sup>20</sup>

Instead, Luxemburg predicted the future of the revolutionary process as follows:

The moment the great National Assembly decides to realize socialism fully and completely, to extirpate the rule of capitalism root and branch, at that moment the struggle begins. Once the bourgeoisie is touched in the heart – and its heart beats from within a fire-proof safe – it will fight a life-and-death battle for its rule and will develop thousands of open

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18 Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 77.

19 Franz: *Zur Diskussion in der KPD*, p. 85.

20 Rosa Luxemburg: *The National Assembly (1918)*. Online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/11/20.htm>.

and covert methods of resistance against the socialist measures. All this is inevitable. All this must be fought through, warded off, beaten down – with or without the National Assembly. The ›civil war‹ which some have anxiously tried to banish from the revolution cannot be dispelled. For civil war is only another name for class struggle, and the notion of implementing socialism without a class struggle, by means of a majority parliamentary decision, is a ridiculous petit-bourgeois illusion.<sup>21</sup>

Karl Liebknecht agreed with her when he argued at the founding congress of the KPD that the pro-revolutionary forces were not intending to cause a ›lemonade revolution‹ (*Limonadenrevolution*).<sup>22</sup> This, however, does not mean that Luxemburg was for a violent civil war in the streets in late 1918/early 1919. Instead, she requested her favorite revolutionary action from the masses, namely strikes.<sup>23</sup> She, in contrast to many other members of the KPD, did not admire the Bolsheviks in Russia and also did not want to imply a party dictatorship in the name of a minority.<sup>24</sup> Luxemburg instead wanted to drive the revolutionary process as far as possible toward the realization of socialism to prepare it for the backdrop of the counter-revolutionary forces.

The last text by Luxemburg, ›Order Prevails in Berlin,‹<sup>25</sup> was published on 14 January 1919 in *Die Rote Fahne*, in which she summed up the situation after the failed Spartacist Uprising<sup>26</sup> and

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21 Ibid.

22 Weber: Der Gründungsparteitag, p. 222, cited in Franz: Zur Diskussion in der KPD, p. 88.

23 Ibid., p. 88.

24 Fernbach: Memories, p. 203.

25 Rosa Luxemburg, *Die Ordnung herrscht in Berlin (1919)*, in: Rosa Luxemburg: Friedensutopien und Hundepolitik: Schriften und Reden, 2nd edition, Stuttgart 2018, pp. 75–81. English text taken from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1919/01/14.htm>.

26 Jörn Schütrumpf (Ed.): *Spartakusaufstand. Der unterschlagene Bericht des Untersuchungsausschusses der verfassunggebenden Preußischen Landesversammlung über die Januar-Unruhen 1919 in Berlin*, Berlin 2018.

the violently crushed workers' occupation of the *Vorwärts* building in Berlin:

The days when glorious German troops first crossed into Belgium, and the days of General von Emmich, the conqueror of Liege, pale before the exploits of Reinhardt and Co. in the streets of Berlin. The government's rampaging troops massacred the mediators who had tried to negotiate the surrender of the *Vorwärts* building, using their rifle butts to beat them beyond recognition. Prisoners who were lined up against the wall and butchered so violently that skull and brain tissue splattered everywhere. In the sight of glorious deeds such as those, who would remember the ignominious defeat at the hands of the French, British, and Americans? Now »Spartacus« is the enemy, Berlin is the place where our officers can savor triumph.<sup>27</sup>

Regardless of such violent reactions against the workers and the political leaders of the uprising – Liebknecht and Luxemburg had to go into hiding after the events – the latter explained that the revolution had not been crushed yet: »The revolution has no time to lose, it continues to rush headlong over still-open graves, past ›victories‹ and ›defeats,‹ toward its great goal. The first duty of fighters for international socialism is to consciously follow the revolution's principles and its path.«<sup>28</sup> At the same time, Luxemburg relativized the possibilities when she pointed toward the limitations that existed for a revolution in Germany:

Was the ultimate victory of the revolutionary proletariat to be expected in this conflict? Could we have expected the overthrow Ebert-Scheidemann and the establishment of a socialist dictatorship? Certainly not, if we carefully consider all the variables that weigh upon the question. The

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27 Luxemburg: *Die Ordnung herrscht in Berlin* (1919), p. 75.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 76.



weak link in the revolutionary cause is the political immaturity of the masses of soldiers, who still allow their officers to misuse them, against the people, for counterrevolutionary ends. This alone shows that no lasting revolutionary victory was possible at this juncture. On the other hand, the immaturity of the military is itself a symptom of the general immaturity of the German revolution.<sup>29</sup>

Regardless of this evaluation, Luxemburg pointed to the value of this revolutionary experience and wanted to express the hope that it would stimulate another revolution in due course:

The whole road of socialism – so far as revolutionary struggles are concerned – is paved with nothing but thunderous defeats. Yet, at the same time, history marches inexorably, step by step, toward final victory! Where would we be today *without* those »defeats,« from which we draw historical experience, understanding, power and idealism? Today, as we advance into the final battle of the proletarian class war, we stand on the foundation of those very defeats; and we can do without *any* of them, because each one contributes to our strength and understanding. [...] How does the defeat of »Spartacus week« appear in the light of the above historical question? Was it a case of raging, uncontrollable revolutionary energy colliding with an insufficiently ripe situation, or was it a case of weak and indecisive action? *Both!* The crisis had a dual nature. The contradiction between the powerful, decisive, aggressive offensive of the Berlin masses on the one hand and the indecisive, half-hearted vacillation of the Berlin leadership on the other is the mark of this latest episode. The leadership failed. But a new leadership can and must be created by the masses and from the masses. The masses are the crucial factor. They are the rock on which the ultimate victory of the revolution will be built. The masses were up to the challenge, and out of this »defeat« they have forged a link in the chain of historic defeats, which

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29 Ibid., p. 77.

is the pride and strength of international socialism. That is why future victories will spring from this »defeat.«<sup>30</sup>

Regardless of her declaration that future times would prove that socialism could be found at the end of a successful revolution, Luxemburg would be dead just one day after her last text was published. She and Liebknecht, who had been hiding in Berlin, were found and brought to the Hotel Eden, beaten, tortured, and eventually killed on 15 January 1919.<sup>31</sup> Later, it was argued that the shots on the two revolutionaries were the first shots of World War II,<sup>32</sup> and Bertolt Brecht would write a »grave inscription« for Luxemburg, who was »killed on the order of German oppressors.«<sup>33</sup> Her murder was considered the climax of the class struggle as it was expressed during and by the German Revolution,<sup>34</sup> and the famous revolutionary's »personal defeat and [...] terrible death can be understood as a kind of figurative anticipation of the fate of the socialist movement in the 20th century as a whole.«<sup>35</sup>

With Luxemburg's murder, Germany and Poland lost one of their most important intellectuals, the international Left lost a figurehead, and humanity a dedicated revolutionary who longed for a better world for all, represented by the idea of democratic socialism. However, her enemies would fear Luxemburg's thoughts even after her death.<sup>36</sup> It

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30 Ibid., 80.

31 Laschitzka: Tod.

32 Alexander Abusch, Bomben auf das Eden-Hotel, in: Freies Deutschland 3/1944, no. 1, pp. 10–11, here p. 11. cited in Peitsch: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 160.

33 Bertolt Brecht: Grabschrift für Rosa Luxemburg in: Bertolt Brecht: Gesammelte Werke, vol. 10. Frankfurt a. M. 1967, p. 958.

34 Elisabeth Hannover-Drück/Heinrich Hannover (Eds.): Der Mord an Rosa Luxemburg und Karl Liebknecht – Dokumentation eines politischen Verbrechens, Göttingen 1989 [1967], p. 7, cited in Peitsch: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 162.

35 Dath: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 130.

36 Schürumpf: Zwischen Liebe und Zorn, p. 95.

was often argued that Luxemburg did not consider freedom in a way that would grant it to her political opponents as well, but such arguments are simply a distortion of her ideas and are the product of a political agenda rather than a close reading of her texts.<sup>37</sup> Since 1905, Luxemburg had been steadily repeating that a revolution could only be successful if the masses accepted its aims.<sup>38</sup> She would never betray this maxim, as without the masses, there could be no revolution, and without a revolution, there could not be freedom for all.

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37 Winkler: *Nachdenken*, p. 12.

38 Rosa Luxemburg: *Blanquismus und Sozialdemokratie*, in: Rosa Luxemburg, *Arbeiterrevolution (1905/06)*, p. 218, cited in Schüttrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 80. Also see *ibid.*, p. 91.



## A Revolutionary Legacy

Rosa Luxemburg was indeed a »personality of outstanding stature,«<sup>1</sup> and besides her numerous writings about revolution theory and reports about revolutionary practice is, as American philosopher Dick Howard emphasized more than four decades ago, »neither a spectacle to behold nor the spokesperson for a new dogma that gives us the placid certainty of what we feel we need.«<sup>2</sup> She rather was and still remains an inspirational individual, whose dedication to the betterment of human life and democratic socialism, as well as her revolutionary enthusiasm, remained almost unmatched in the 20th century. She not only presented »an ardent plea in favor of workers' councils as an essential element of the coming revolution,«<sup>3</sup> but at the same time left no doubt about her resistance against any kind of corruption of a revolutionary process by a small minority, especially since such corruption would turn revolutions into helixes of violence.<sup>4</sup> Clara Zetkin confirmed in this regard that »[s]ocialism was for Rosa Luxemburg a dominating passion, which absorbed her whole life, a passion at once intellectual and ethical. [...] Her greatest joy, her dream, was to live

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1 Piper: Rosa Luxemburg, p. 11.

2 Dick Howard: *La teoría y la práctica revolucionaria. Rosa Luxemburg*, *Materiales* 3/1977, pp. 130–153, here pp. 132–133. Similar Howard: *The Marxian Legacy*, p. 24.

3 Howard: *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 264.

4 Pelz: *Another Luxemburgism*, p. 6.

to see the revolution, to take her share of its struggles.«<sup>5</sup> To achieve this aim, she continuously demanded a revolutionary process that was determined by the masses, which could not be organized in any hierarchical way or military form<sup>6</sup> but needed to act in a spontaneous reaction by the people toward the existent conditions within society.

Regardless of the fact that she had seen how revolutions failed, whether it was in Russia in 1905 and 1917 or in Germany in 1918/19, Luxemburg never lost her optimism that revolutions, as a natural and fundamental historical force, would lead to freedom and democratic socialism at last.<sup>7</sup> Feminist Studies scholar Maria Tamboukou is therefore correct in her evaluation that »[r]evolutionary praxis was an ongoing process for Luxemburg, a living organism through which freedom would be founded in the new body politic of socialism.«<sup>8</sup> Socialism, according to Luxemburg, in the truest sense of the word, »could only be achieved with the full mobilization of the workers as active actors in their own liberation. [...] The Party, for Rosa Luxemburg, was to be neither a substitute for the working masses nor a[n] electoral machine using the common people as passive markers of ballots.«<sup>9</sup> These ideas should be highlighted when the revolutionary legacy of Luxemburg is discussed, although it is not taken into consideration often enough.

This is probably also a consequence of the problems related to her commemoration, beginning in the interwar period directly after

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5 Clara Zetkin: Rosa Luxemburg, in: *The Communist International 5/1919*, no. 1, cited in Maria Tamboukou: *Imagining and Living the Revolution. An Arendtian Reading of Rosa Luxemburg's Letters and Writings*, in: *Feminist Review* 106/2014, pp. 27–42, here p. 29.

6 Martine Leibovici: *Révolution et démocratie. Rosa Luxemburg*, in: *Revue française de science politique* 41/1991, no. 1, pp. 59–80, here p. 62.

7 Krug/Graf: *Zur Aktualität*, p. 240.

8 Tamboukou: *Imagining and Living*, p. 33.

9 Pelz: *Another Luxemburgism*, p. 6.

she and Liebknecht were murdered in January 1919.<sup>10</sup> And it was not only the conservative forces who denied Luxemburg her legacy as an important revolutionary intellectual but also the Left. When Lenin's ideas were installed as the dominant dogma of the communist world at the Fifth Congress of the Comintern in 1924, Luxemburg's image was demolished, and in 1931, »Stalin condemned her as an enemy of Bolshevism, on the ground that she shared the notion of permanent revolution with the Mensheviks. This was a fatal blow to Luxemburg's influence.«<sup>11</sup> The German communists, led by Ruth Fischer,<sup>12</sup> Arcady Maslov,<sup>13</sup> and Ernst Thälmann,<sup>14</sup> condemned Luxemburg to insignificance, although some remained loyal to her legacy, and it was Ernst Meyer, Clara Zetkin, and Paul Frölich who kept her ideas alive.<sup>15</sup> Luxemburg's political positions were too dangerous for Stalinism, as her demands for democracy and open debates were dangerous for an interpretation of the past that sanctioned totalitarian rule.

This was similarly true for Luxemburg's commemoration in the German Democratic Republic.<sup>16</sup> One could not allow such dangerous ideas to be read or spread. Nevertheless, Luxemburg's ideas survived in a way, could not be destroyed, and have rather turned into classic

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10 Ariane Jossin: *Un siècle d'histoire politique allemande. Commémorer Liebknecht et Luxemburg au Zentralfriedhof Friedrichsfelde de Berlin*, in: *Le Mouvement social* 237/2011, pp. 115–133, here pp. 116–119.

11 Lim: *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 499. Also see Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 44.

12 Mario Keffler: *Ruth Fischer. Ein Leben mit und gegen Kommunisten (1895–1961)*, Cologne et al. 2013.

13 Mario Keffler: *A Political Biography of Arkadij Maslow, 1891–1941. Dissident Against His Will*, London 2020.

14 Elke Reuter et al. (Eds.): *Luxemburg oder Stalin. Schaltjahr 1928. Die KPD am Scheideweg*, Berlin 2003.

15 Klaus Kinner: *Die Luxemburg-Rezeption in KPD und Komintern*, in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): *Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes*, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 305–317, here pp. 309–310.

16 Jossin: *Un siècle*, pp. 119–126 and Kemmerer: *Rosakind*, pp. 47–50.

reads for the New Left since the 1960s.<sup>17</sup> Hannah Arendt later wrote an essay about her, in which she »paid tribute to a woman, a theoretician, a politician whom she had admired as a role model since her youth,«<sup>18</sup> thereby giving witness to the power of Luxemburg's writings decades after her death.<sup>19</sup> Her works can still be meaningfully read as the issues she addressed 150 years ago still exist, and the miseries of humanity have not been resolved since her death.

All in all, Rosa Luxemburg was a true revolutionary, whose theoretical reflections were not only based on Marx's and Engels's writings but also on her practical experiences during the Russian Revolution of 1905. She consequently considered her revolutionary concept as a work in progress and did not just demand that others understand revolutions as a possibility to learn something about historical processes. Luxemburg never lost her revolutionary enthusiasm, and while she kept an open mind to learning new things due to both living through and thinking about revolutions, she could not accept the corruption of two basic elements she considered essential: freedom and democracy. This brought her posthumously into conflict with Lenin and those who needed to deny her the standing and rank of a brilliant socialist intellectual, and who instead damned her to be remembered as a woman who had failed or a socialist who was, like Lenin or Stalin, nothing more than a totalitarian mind longing for power. Luxemburg was and still is more than that and will continue to inspire those who keep an open mind, consider freedom to be the basis for human co-existence, and demand a revolution to reach a better and juster world, expressed by a truly democratic socialism.

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17 Bartsch: Die Aktualität Rosa Luxemburgs, p. 848; Schulman: Introduction, p. 1.

18 Sidonia Blättler/Irene M. Marti/Senem Saner: Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt. Against the Destruction of Political Spheres of Freedom, in: *Hypatia* 20/2005, no. 2, pp. 88–101, here p. 89.

19 Hannah Arendt: Rosa Luxemburg 1871–1919, in: Hannah Arendt: Menschen in finsternen Zeiten, Munich 1968, pp. 49–74.



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