



Rosa Luxemburg - Revolutionary fighter

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"In Rosa Luxemburg the socialist idea was a dominating and powerful passion of both heart and brain, a truly creative passion which burned ceaselessly. The great task and the over-powering ambition of this astonishing woman was to prepare the way for social revolution, to clear the path of history for socialism. To experience the revolution, to fight its battles, that was the highest happiness for her. With a will, determination, selflessness and devotion for which words are too weak, she consecrated her whole life and her whole being to socialism, not only in her tragic death, but throughout her whole life, daily and hourly, through the struggles of many years. She was the sharp sword, the living flame of the revolution." Clara Zetkin.

On the night of 15 January 1919, two great socialist revolutionaries died. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were brutally murdered by paramilitaries, acting on the orders of the German social democratic government.

At the time of their deaths, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were leaders of the Spartacus group, the left wing of the workers' movement. They had broken from the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) after its betrayal of the 1918 German revolution. In January 1919 the social democratic government of Friedrich Ebert was trying to rebuild a capitalist Germany in tandem with the ruling class.

In contrast, Luxemburg and Liebknecht were fighting for a socialist revolution to rid Germany of the corrupt politicians, the warmongering generals and profiteering capitalists who had led the country into the terrible carnage of the First World War. Today Karl and Rosa are remembered as heroes of the revolution, an inspiration to workers, to youth, to women fighting injustice.

Their writings and their actions are rich in lessons. Their murderers are remembered as those who were prepared to butcher the workers of Berlin to preserve bourgeois rule. Their betrayal of the revolution led, ultimately, to decades of inequality, terror and war under the Nazis. Liebknecht and Luxemburg's fight against the traitors in the workers' movement started long before the fateful events of January 1919.

It began inside the SPD in the years before the outbreak of the First World War. In the early years of the twentieth century, capitalism appeared to be set for continued expansion. The European powers, first Britain, followed by France, Germany and Russia had undergone massive industrial and commercial development. The big companies, banks and governments of these countries had expanded worldwide.

In search of new markets for their goods, for raw materials and areas for investment, these Great Powers were carving up the world between them, exploiting the resources and labour of the colonies. At the same time, capitalism continued to exploit the working class across Europe. The workers had responded with trade unions, co-operative societies and their own political parties. Socialist ideas developed; workers wanted not only equality and justice for all but a new kind of society where production would be for need rather than for profit.

The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) was the first permanent, organised mass party of the working class. Following the repeal of the anti-socialist laws in 1890, it operated on a legal basis within Germany and had a significant success in parliamentary elections. It was to become the centre of the Second International which linked the socialist parties of different countries together. The SPD was founded by Wilhelm Liebknecht (Karl's father) and August Bebel. It embraced Marxist ideas; it was committed to the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of socialism. At the same time it worked for the reforms which workers urgently needed: better conditions at work and in the towns,

freedom of speech and the vote. Marx, Engel's and the early leaders of the socialist parties saw the struggle for reforms as a means of preparing the working class for the social revolution against capitalism, not as a substitute for that revolution. They recognised that without such a revolution all reforms would prove, at best, temporary. Reforms could be snatched back by the bosses whenever the drive for profit demanded new attacks on the workers. Equally, they recognised that the bosses' state - its armed bodies of men dedicated to the defence of capitalist property - would never tolerate the 'gradual' reforming out of existence of the profit system. They would strike back viciously at any working class that threatened this system.

Marx and Engel's had also argued that the capitalist system would inevitably run into crisis. But in the early years of the twentieth century many of the leaders of the socialist parties increasingly questioned this tenet of Marxism. Capitalism was expanding world wide and European firms were making big profits. The existing governments and the big companies were able to deliver a series of reforms and improvements for the working class. Given these concrete circumstances, the reform of capitalism, rather than its revolutionary overthrow, began to appear as a real possibility to some members of the SPD and the Second International.

The fight against revisionism

The first openly 'revisionist' wing in the SPD was led by Eduard Bernstein. Bernstein summed up his revision of Marxist theory in this way: 'The final aim of socialism, whatever it is means nothing to me; it is the movement itself which is everything'.

Rosa Luxemburg, already well known as an innovative intellectual and talented speaker in the party, came to the fore in the struggle against Bernstein. Rosa was born in 1871 in Poland, which was then part of the Russian Empire. From the age of 16 she had been involved in working class politics and she was a founding member of the Social Democratic Party of Poland and Lithuania. In 1897 she moved to Germany to work in the SPD. She entered the debate with enthusiasm and became the sharpest critic of Bernstein's opportunist attack on the 'final goal'. She wrote a pamphlet *Social Reform or Revolution* which remains today the classic statement of the revolutionary case against reformism.

Luxemburg argued that, despite surface appearances, capitalism was still a crisis ridden system and that to strive solely for reforms meant adapting to capitalism itself: 'It is not true that socialism will result automatically from the daily struggle of the working class. Socialism will be the consequence of (1) the growing contradictions of the capitalist economy and (2) of the comprehension by the working class of the unavoidability of the suppression of these contradictions through a social transformation.' The revisionist belief that reforms could overcome capitalism's contradictions was an illusion.

The trade union struggle, although vital, was a 'Labour of Sisyphus'. By this she meant that trade unions under capitalism were doomed to a constant struggle to defend their wages and conditions, while capitalist measures such as expanding the labour market would always send the 'stone' rolling down hill again. Her arguments infuriated the more conservative, bureaucratic party and trade unions leaders. The trade union leaders tried to caricature Luxemburg's argument as anti-trade union. But Luxemburg was clear about the importance of the trade union struggle: 'this labour of Sisyphus is indispensable if the worker is to obtain at all the wage rate due to him in the given situation of the labour market'. She argued simply that the trade union struggle would never be enough.

Those at the centre of the party like Karl Kautsky began to distance themselves from Luxemburg. While opposing Bernstein on a theoretical level, Kautsky increasingly bowed to the leadership's reformist practice. Luxemburg became one of the acknowledged leaders of the left wing of the party, together with her life long friend, Clara Zetkin. Zetkin's own work in mobilising working class women to fight for socialism and against their own oppression, brought her up against the conservatives in the party leadership. These two women were fearless in their attacks on the right wing and where necessary the centre. In return they suffered numerous personal attacks and hostility.

The 1905 Revolution and the mass strikes

Proof of the growing division in the SPD came with the Russian Revolution of 1905. Luxemburg welcomed it and threw herself into it, both practically and in distilling its lessons for future struggles. She secretly returned to Russian Poland, where she was still wanted by the authorities. The Polish workers inspired by events in St. Petersburg at the heart of the Russian Empire, were involved in a mass strike wave. Luxemburg threw herself into revolutionary activity, producing a clandestine party paper.

As the revolutionary wave subsided Luxemburg was arrested and imprisoned. After her release she eventually returned to Germany. In the aftermath of 1905 Luxemburg concentrated on analysing the revolution and its implications internationally. She developed her ideas on the central importance of the mass strike. For whole periods in 1905 such strikes had paralysed the Russian empire.

Luxemburg argued that mass strikes were a vital part of the fight for workers' revolution. This brought her into a head-on collision with the German trade union leaders. These abject reformists regarded all talk of the mass strike as "playing with fire".

Luxemburg's pamphlet *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions* vigorously attacked these union leaders and the SPD leaders who were allied to them. Their opposition to the mass strike was, said Luxemburg, proof of their opposition to the spontaneous revolutionary action of the working class. And in practice this would place them alongside the bosses and against the workers in any revolutionary crisis.

She was rapidly to be proved to be correct. In this period her differences with Kautsky became fierce. Kautsky defended the use of the mass strike on paper, but consigned it to a far away battle for power in the never-never land of a revolution that he no longer really believed was either possible or necessary. It was a sign of his shift from the "centre" to the right in the SPD. In practice in Germany, Kautsky argued that, in the fight to extend the vote, a policy of attrition was necessary.

By this, he meant avoiding a confrontation with the ruling class - therefore rejecting strikes and mass agitation - and pursuing instead a purely electoral route to achieving greater democracy. Luxemburg saw exactly where this was leading - to reformism - and said so, even though revolutionaries, such as Lenin, defended Kautsky against a "wrong interpretation" of his attrition strategy. Only later did Lenin realise and acknowledge that Luxemburg had been right in her insistence that Kautsky was accommodating to the right wing. Kautsky and the centre group in the SPD could still defend Marxist orthodoxy and acknowledge the necessity of revolution in the abstract, but in practice they vacillated and went along with a reformist practice.

Luxemburg also tackled the theoretical roots of opportunism. In her book *The Accumulation of Capital* she argued that far from being able to continue its expansion, capitalism was doomed to crisis. Her analysis had weaknesses and was attacked by Lenin and others, but the task she set herself was a vital one. The capitalist world order was beginning to crumble. The Great Powers were marching inexorably towards war.

Defending internationalism

In this context a key battle inside the SPD and the International was to maintain working class internationalism. The rivalry between the Great Powers was becoming more intense.

It began to break into open hostilities at the turn of the century, with the Boer War of 1899 confirming British imperialism's bloodthirsty appetites, and the Russo-Japanese war of 1905 showing that every part of the globe could become a site for inter-imperialist clashes. In 1904, Britain and France formed the so-called Entente Cordiale, a treaty clearly aimed against Germany. In each country, chauvinist and militarist propaganda was growing. The left wingers in the SPD, including Luxemburg, Zetkin and Karl Liebknecht, raised constant warnings against the war danger.

At the world congress of the Second International, meeting in Stuttgart in 1907, the revolutionary forces won out over the opportunists. Bernstein and his supporters advanced a series of reactionary arguments which showed how far they were bowing down to imperialism. They were for reform of colonial policy, rather than outright support for the fight

against colonial oppression. Right-wingers, like the SPD leader Vollmar, wanted to embrace the idea of a German "fatherland". He was joined by others like Ebert and, in particular, Gustav Noske who declared: "The Social Democrats will not lag behind the bourgeois parties and will shoulder their rifles. We want Germany to be as well armed as possible." The resolution adopted at the Congress rejected such chauvinist ideas. It spelt out clearly the dangers of the approaching war, affirmed its roots in capitalist competition and outlined the tactics of the socialist parties against militarism. Its last sections were drafted jointly by Lenin, Luxemburg and Martov: "The Congress holds that it is the duty of the working classes, and especially their representatives in parliaments, recognising the class character of bourgeois society and the motive for the preservation of the opposition between nations, to fight with all their strength against naval and military armament and to refuse to supply the means for it, as well as to labour for the education of working class youth in the spirit of the brotherhood of nations and of socialism, and to see that it is filled with class consciousness.

The Congress sees in the democratic organisation of the army, in the popular militia instead of the standing army, an essential guarantee for the prevention of aggressive wars, and for facilitating the removal of differences between nations. "If there was an outbreak of war, the parties of the International pledged themselves to strive with all their power to make use of the violent economic and political crisis brought about by the war to rouse the people and thereby to hasten the abolition of capitalist class rule".

But it was one thing to win the resolution and quite another to hold the leaders like Noske to the internationalist position.

The campaign for a consistent anti-militarist policy, centred on the youth, was carried forward by Karl Liebknecht, in the teeth of opposition from the increasingly reactionary SPD leaders.

The importance of a revolutionary party

As the stranglehold of the bureaucracy and the poison of chauvinist ideas grew inside the SPD, the battle of the left to defend revolutionary principles and practice intensified. But this struggle was fought issue by issue. In hindsight we can see that Luxemburg and Liebknecht should have launched a clear factional struggle and tried to oust the opportunists from the leadership of the party.

Lenin's sharp factional campaign inside the Russian party - and the effective creation of a separate party manifested in the split between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks - meant that the Bolsheviks were free to win support in the working class for consistent revolutionary policies.

Luxemburg understood the importance of a revolutionary party, but not a combat party like that of the Bolsheviks. She stressed the importance of the spontaneous activity of the working class, of its capacity for forcing the pace in a revolutionary period, as against the importance of the role of party leadership in the revolutionary struggle.

Her experience of the dampening effect of the party and trade union bureaucracy in Germany makes her views understandable. But they were one sided, false and ultimately had fatal consequences in the revolution of 1918/19. Luxemburg understood the way that reformist ideas gripped the working class on a day to day basis and the need to keep up constant propaganda against these ideas. But a revolutionary party needs to do more than just battle against wrong ideas. It needs to weld together the best, most revolutionary elements of the working class around a common programme so they can act decisively as a unit in a revolutionary crisis.

The masses can propel events forward and overtake their conservative leaders at key points. But to simply rely on this bringing victory - to ignore the role of leadership in directing this spontaneous action towards a consciously fought for goal - is wrong.

Each time spontaneity takes the class struggle to new heights, each time it intensifies this struggle to boiling point, the question is raised - where next? The role of the party is to match the energy and creativity of the masses with a programme that answers this question and an organisation capable of turning the answer into a practical course of

action.

But when the wrong answer to the question, where next, triumphs in the ranks of the spontaneous mass movement the consequences are always disastrous, leading either to the ebbing of the movement or to its forcible suppression by a class enemy aided by reformist traitors. The absence of a party in such cases is the key to understanding why so many spontaneous rising of the workers have gone down to defeat.

War and Revolution

When war broke out in 1914, the true extent of the rot in the Second International was revealed. The long struggle of Liebknecht and Luxemburg against militarism in society and opportunism in the party could not prevent the collapse of the International.

One by one, the parties of the Second International fell in behind their own rulers - the most significant exception was the Russian party. On 4 August 1914, the German Social Democracy voted for war credits, pledging its support to the German imperialist war effort and calling on German workers to slaughter their brothers and sisters in other countries in the interests of the German bosses' profits.

Liebknecht, himself a Reichstag deputy, led the fight against voting for war credits inside the party caucus, but obeyed party discipline and voted with the rest. It was the one and only time he was to do anything that supported the war. In the following months and years, Liebknecht, Luxemburg and Zetkin tried to rally the workers' movement against the war. Many of those who risked imprisonment by waging a fight against the imperialist war were the young workers trained by the youth organisation.

The women's organisations built by Zetkin also supplied many supporters for the true internationalists in the party. In December 1914, Liebknecht was the lone voice and only vote in the Reichstag against a renewal of war credits. He used the platform of the Reichstag to appeal to workers to oppose the war. As the dreadful carnage moved into its first then second year, opposition began to grow. In 1916, Liebknecht was the first to address a public demonstration against the war, in the heart of Berlin. He shouted "Down with the war! Down with the government".

Inevitably the police stopped his speech and imprisoned him, but his words carried across Germany and indeed across Europe. His slogan "The main enemy is at home" became the touchstone of revolutionary action against the war. Luxemburg spent a large part of the war in prison where her health suffered badly. But while she fell prey at times to depression and exhaustion, she maintained her revolutionary optimism and smuggled out her analysis of the war. Both Luxemburg and Liebknecht realised that the old party and international were dead - a "stinking corpse", as Luxemburg called the Social Democracy.

Her Junius Pamphlet rallied workers not only to oppose the war but to the necessity of socialist revolution. The war had given shape to Engel's prediction that capitalist society presented the dilemma of an advance to socialism or a reversion to barbarism. The war was the living hell of workers slaughtering one another; to end it; the workers must raise the slogan "Workers of all Countries Unite" and turn against their real enemy, the ruling class.

To fight for this slogan Luxemburg and Liebknecht drew together the fragments of the left into the Spartakusbund. Rosa's former companion, Leo Jogiches, shouldered the burden of leading the organisation through this desperately difficult period.

As the war dragged on the Spartakists found increasing support. Luxemburg joined with Lenin in the call for a new International and in 1917, she hailed the Russian revolution. She had differences with the Bolsheviks but saw immediately that not only was the Bolshevik rising the "salvation of the honour of international socialism" but that it must be seen as the first of a series of workers' revolutions across Europe. By 1918, this seemed a real possibility. A series of workers' protests and mutinies in the armed forces swept across Germany culminating in November 1918 with the collapse of the war effort. Soldiers and workers' councils were set up. Freed from prison, Liebknecht threw himself into the ferment, moving in secret from one meeting to the next. He was quickly co-opted onto the

revolutionary shop stewards committee.

Rosa was also released and headed straight into the maelstrom of revolution, despite failing health. Mass strikes and demonstrations on 9 November forced the Kaiser to abdicate. The Russian revolution was a beacon to the working class and a terrible warning to the bourgeoisie. But in Germany, right on hand, were the leaders of the SPD. With the words, "I hate revolution like mortal sin", SPD chief Friedrich Ebert took over the job of Chancellor. The SPD formed a government committed to protecting the bosses from the workers' revolution. During the following weeks, with dual power existing between an insurgent working class and a teetering bourgeois regime, the Spartakists worked tirelessly to win over the leadership of the working class and drive forward the socialist revolution.

But sections of the workers still looked to their old leaders. On 10 November, Ebert was made head of the revolutionary government by the Berlin Workers' and Soldiers' Council. On the very same day he was conspiring with the army to restore order. Luxemburg and Liebknecht launched the daily paper, Die Rote Fahne (The Red Flag). Luxemburg spelt out the tasks of the revolution and the choices facing the revolutionary workers: "Either the continuation of capitalism, new wars and a very early decline into chaos and anarchy or the abolition of capitalist exploitation.

"The new German Communist Party (KPD) was formed around the nucleus of the Spartakusbund in December 1918. But before it had time to consolidate itself and launch a renewed challenge to the social democratic traitors, those traitors drowned the revolution in blood. The right wing social democratic government put together a reactionary armed force made up of loyal troops and the Freikorps (a reactionary militia of ex-soldiers, many of whom went on to join Hitler's military gangs).

The same Gustav Noske, who had once declared his support for the fatherland in the SPD's conference hall, now proclaimed himself chief "bloodhound" in the war against the Spartakists. Ebert, Noske and the entire SPD right launched an unprecedented propaganda war, accusing Luxemburg and Liebknecht of drawing ordinary workers into renewed bloodshed.

The final days

In the face of a series of provocations the revolutionary workers' leaders, along with Karl Liebknecht, became convinced they had to respond and set on a course of overthrowing the government. Luxemburg was convinced that the revolutionary workers and the KPD were not yet strong enough for such a decisive confrontation.

She understood that many workers still clung in hope to the SPD. But she concluded that the communists had no alternative but to place themselves at the head of the rising. During her final few days alive, her brilliant articles for Rote Fahne concentrated first on the need for decisive action and, as the right wing tightened its grip, on assimilating the lessons and preparing for the next phase of struggle.

The Spartakists were crushed; their rising was premature and ill prepared. But compared to the reformist traitors and the miserable cowards grouped around the apologist for the right, Kautsky, the Spartakists were revolutionary giants, a pledge for the future. A pledge that new generations of young revolutionaries will honour in the years to come. But their defeat allowed the right to go on an all out offensive. Reformism unleashed its dogs of war, the Freikorps. They indulged in a bloody frenzy against the left.

And they ruthlessly hunted down Luxemburg and Liebknecht. On 15 January 1919, the two leaders were caught and dragged off for "interrogation". In fact they were going straight to their deaths. Liebknecht was beaten and shot in the back so his captors could claim he was "shot while trying to escape". Luxemburg's head was smashed in with a rifle butt, she was then shot in the head and her body was thrown into a canal.

The legacy of Luxemburg

On the eve of her capture, Rosa wrote her last article, "Order Reigns in Berlin". It not only analyses the reasons for the

defeat but spells out her belief in final victory. It shows how the "Order" boasted of by the treacherous social democratic leaders will be short lived nature: "Order reigns in Berlin! You stupid lackeys! Your order is built on sand. Tomorrow the revolution will rear its head once again and to your horror will proclaim, with trumpets blazing: "I was, I am, I will be!"

Luxemburg's last hours, like the whole of her life, are a lasting inspiration to workers everywhere. Her memory has been trampled on both by her opponents - history text books still refer to the "Spartakist rising" as a threat to democracy - and by her supposed supporters. Today's inheritors of the traditions of social democracy forget the bloodthirsty role of Ebert and Noske.

Today's social democrats like to claim that Rosa Luxemburg was an opponent of Bolshevism, despite her ardent support for the Bolshevik revolution. They turn the weaknesses in her politics - her failure to understand the need for a revolutionary combat party, her over-reliance on the spontaneous activity of the working class and her suspicion of the party discipline of the Bolsheviks - into excuses for their own miserable reformist schemas, their own cowardice and their own failure to confront and fight the class enemy with revolutionary methods.

Rosa made errors - as every great revolutionary does - but reformism and cowardice were completely alien to her. Rosa would be mercilessly critical of her "supporters". They weren't pacifists or anti-Bolshevists. She was a revolutionary communist, murdered for her undying commitment to the working class and to its struggle to overthrow capitalism. Her death is an indictment of both capitalism and the reformists in the workers' movement who defend it.

Rosa died fighting. Her death also demonstrated a spirit of courage and defiance, one that has lived on through generations of working class and revolutionary militants. No capitalist has ever found a means of killing this spirit and no capitalist ever will. That is why capitalists live in fear for the future of their system while revolutionary workers live in optimistic expectation for the future of theirs.

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