

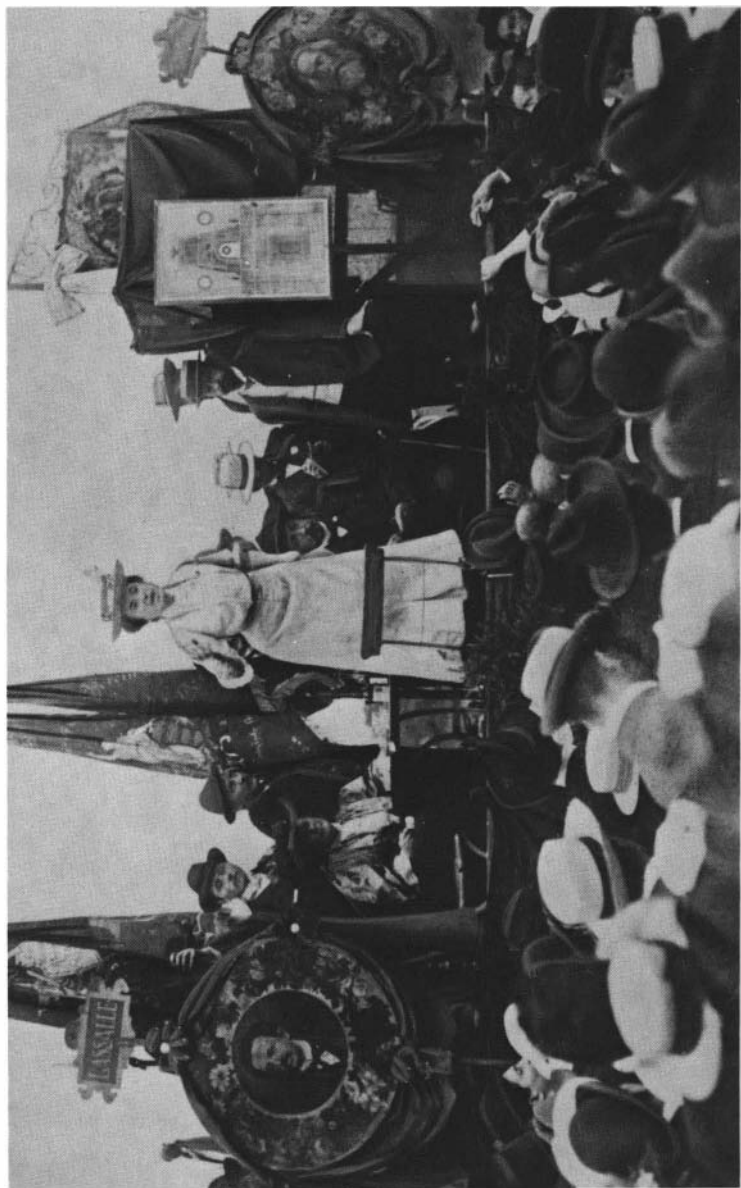
# ***The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg***

*Edited and with an Introduction by*  
***Stephen Eric Bronner***  
*with a Foreword by Henry Pachter*



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Rosa Luxemburg addressing a rally. The pictures on either side of her are of Lassalle and Marx. (Courtesy Dietz Verlag)

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## Foreword

On January 15, 1919, mercenaries of the counterrevolution murdered Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, the two leaders of the Spartacus uprising. One year later, a small volume of Rosa Luxemburg's "Letters from Prison" appeared in print. These were addressed to Liebknecht's wife Sonja, while Karl was at the front and then in jail, and they showed the dreaded "Red Rosa" as a warm and sensitive woman who was concerned with the birds she watched from her cell, romantic poetry, and the worries of her friends. In short, they showed Rosa Luxemburg to be human.

Three years later, her friend Luise Kautsky published the letters that Rosa Luxemburg had sent to her and her husband over the years. Karl Kautsky had been the theoretical panjandrum of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the editor of its prestigious journal, *Die Neue Zeit*. He and Rosa Luxemburg had at first been comrades-in-arms on the party's left but then quarrelled over many issues including the timid course taken by the journal, the mass strike and, finally, the party's support of the Kaiser's war. Nevertheless, Luise erected this monument to her mourned friend. Rosa Luxemburg's criticisms of Kautsky emerge from those letters, and yet one hears once again the voice of a tender individual whose heart beat as much with her private circle of intimates as with the great causes of mankind.

After Luise's death, her son Benedikt—with whom Rosa had played when he was a child—discovered another bundle of letters. Some of them revealed her budding love for a younger man, Hans Diefenbach, while the collection as a whole permitted an even greater appreciation of her multifaceted nature. Benedikt Kautsky was able to publish these letters after World War II, and soon thereafter the Polish Communist party released two volumes of Rosa Luxemburg's letters to her first love and permanent political mentor, Leo Jogiches.



Then too, Charlotte Beradt published Rosa's intimate letters to her secretary Mathilde Jacob, which illuminate the everyday cares and needs so much a part of one's life. Finally, I understand that about a thousand letters still lie in the archives of the Institute for Marxism-Leninism in East Berlin.

I have always wanted the human face of this great revolutionary to be made more visible to the general public. It is this that the present volume seeks to accomplish. In it we see the woman, the lover, the companion, the friend of nature and poetry, the prisoner who charms her jailer, the employer, the cook, and, of course, the political activist.

A number of things were necessary for the completion of this collection. First, the letters had to be selected—but the temptation to display all the riches that might overburden a book of this sort had to be resisted. Secondly, there was a need for new translations on account of the unsatisfactory original rendering of the texts. In this respect, Stephen Eric Bronner and Hedwig Pachter have labored hard to do justice to the spirit of the letters while making the translations readable. Finally, the letters themselves had to be placed within a context. To this effect Professor Bronner has contributed a brilliant introduction, in which he explains Rosa's life and thought and why it is time for this continent to receive her message.

I very much hope that Rosa Luxemburg will find a better reception in this country than she did in her own. In Poland and East Germany, she is thought of as a martyr and a saint, duly celebrated on appropriate state occasions. In West Germany, her picture graces a postage stamp, but not even the Young Socialists march under her name. The irony has been grippingly expressed by the young poet Peter Steinbach, who fled East Germany in 1958.

Somewhere behind the Red City Hall  
Stands  
the entire Central Committee  
before your remains  
MEMORIAL ROSA  
Those who here bend their heads  
Shoot at  
Whoever thinks differently  
Or would like to live elsewhere

And they conclude contracts  
with those who  
Oh Rosa-on-the-post-stamp  
lick your behind  
after nosily justifying themselves  
Has mankind  
Ever sunk so low?

*Henry Pachter*



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## Preface

If Rosa Luxemburg's entire correspondence were compiled, it would surely amount to at least six huge volumes. To a certain extent, of course, any selection procedure contains an arbitrary element, but the difficulty is increased when one considers that certain collections of Rosa Luxemburg's letters—all of which were compiled after her death—sought to emphasize a particular aspect of her personality to the detriment of other facets.

The purpose of this collection, however, is to show the personality of Rosa Luxemburg in its political as well as in its personal dimensions. Consequently, the selection of these letters involves an attempt to present the spirit of her time as it is reflected in her political thinking, activism, and personal concerns. This intent dictated the criteria used in the selection process; thus, letters that relate to truly minor political incidents have been eliminated along with those that are repetitive or deal with everyday occurrences of secondary interest.

The benefit that has been derived from the two major biographies will be obvious, both in the introduction and in the evaluation of the letters. The earlier book by Paul Fröhlich, a founder of the German Communist Party (KPD) who later became the leader of the German Socialist Workers' Party (SAP), is oriented towards Rosa Luxemburg the public figure. The second biography, Peter Nettl's two-volume work, is the standard work dealing with all aspects of Rosa Luxemburg's life and career.

The main sources of the letters compiled in this collection are the following: *Briefe aus dem Gefängnis* (Berlin 1920); *Briefe an Karl and Luise Kautsky* (Berlin 1923), which was translated by Louis P. Lochner as *Letters to Karl and Luise Kautsky* (New York 1923); "Aus den Briefen Rosa Luxemburgs an Franz Mehring," edited by F. Schwabel, *Internationale* 2, no. 3 (1923):67-72; "Unbekannter Brief

Rosa Luxemburgs. Als Rosa aus dem Gefängnis kam . . ." *Rote Fahne*, 18 July 1926, no. 165, Supplement p. 1; *Briefe an Freunde*, ed. Benedikt Kautsky (Hamburg 1950); "Einige Briefe Rosa Luxemburgs und andere Dokumente," *Bulletin of the International Institute of Social History* 8, no. 1 (1952):9-39; W. Blumenberg, "Einige Briefe Rosa Luxemburgs," *International Review of Social History* 8, pt. 1 (1963):92-108; Gotz Langkau, "Briefe Rosa Luxemburgs im IISG—Ein Nachtrag," *International Review of Social History* 21, pt. 3 (1976):413-494; *Briefe an Leon Jogiches*, ed. Feliks Tych (Frankfurt/Main 1971); *Rosa Luxemburg im Gefängnis*, ed. Charlotte Beradt (Frankfurt/Main 1973); *Vive la Lutte: Correspondance 1891-1914*, ed. Georges Haupt et al. (Paris 1976); and *J'étais, je suis, je serai!: Correspondance 1914-1919*, ed. Georges Haupt et al. (Paris 1977).

I would also like to thank these friends and colleagues for reading and commenting on the manuscript: Raya Dunayevskaya, A. Thomas Ferguson, Loren Goldner, Douglas Kellner, John McClure and George McKenna. My thanks are also extended to Dorothea Frankl for her help with the translation and Larry Hartenian for reading the manuscript and for his assistance with various phases of the book's progress. Then, too, I extend my appreciation to Jean Baldauf, Deierdre O'Shea, and Lynne DeCicco for their time in helping to prepare the manuscripts.

*Stephen Eric Bronner*  
New Brunswick, N.J.

## *Reflections on Rosa*



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## *Rosa Luxemburg and the Other Tradition*

There is always a tradition of liberation that stands in opposition to the heritage that a given society preserves and propagates. This other tradition is one that is hidden, that has not been dominant and has never been associated with power. Indeed, the very reason it continues to exist is that it opposes the given system by aspiring toward a freedom that has not yet been attained.

In view of the oppression that has been justified in the name of socialism, a recovery of this emancipatory tradition has become crucial for Marxists. For there can be little doubt that, despite the new interest in such an emancipatory Marxism among certain segments of the intelligentsia, most continue to view socialism in terms of a Marx-Lenin-Stalin lineage. The image that this lineage conjures up is a "socialism of gray," a socialism of dictatorship and concrete, of repression, censorship, and party orthodoxy.

Were this abomination really equivalent to the potential within Marxism, there would truly be no reason to work for the transformation of capitalism. But the deformation that exists in the East is not equivalent to socialism, nor does it exhaust the forms that socialism can take. There remains a Marxian heritage that strains against the shackles of both capitalist and "socialist" oppression.

Rosa Luxemburg, following Marx, stands at the beginning of this emancipatory heritage. In her letters, which reflect the development of both her politics and her personality, a perspective emerges that is neither bureaucratic nor party oriented. This perspective does not dote on some "objectivistic" historical determinism: it demands instead that the masses of the oppressed take control of their destiny and that the individual not be sacrificed to party decree. These letters of Rosa Luxemburg become the testament of a dedicated socialist whose influence extended beyond the revolts that shook Europe from 1918 to 1923 to the student revolts of the late sixties. Indeed, Rosa Luxemburg has helped give birth to an intellectual tradition that has been carried over by thinkers and movements outside the mainstream of Marxism, such as the "council communists" in Germany, the CNT (Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo) in Spain, and the Workers' Opposition in Russia.

The tradition that Rosa Luxemburg fostered has usually been defeated wherever it has emerged in concrete revolt, while her thought has, on the whole, been ignored in the West and castigated in the East.



It is no wonder, for the demands that this heritage presents would call into question those political constellations of oppression existing in both worlds. Furthermore, in contrast to the social democratic parties that simply seek to improve the distribution of wealth, and the liberal parties that mouth the phrases of formal representative democracy, the Marxian tradition in which Rosa Luxemburg stands at the forefront seeks to intensify and extend democracy by socializing production and knowledge. What becomes so very clear in the letters in this collection is the demand that the working class not remain content with a better share of the wealth it produces. It must also seek control over the production process itself and extend democracy beyond the realm of the formally political, making it a component of everyday life. There is, of course, a romantic element to these demands—an element that receives expression in the letters and contradicts the “socialism of gray.” It is manifested in many ways. But whether it be in a description of a street corner, a view of the night from her prison cell, or her delight in the revolts of the working class, one thing is always evident: for Rosa Luxemburg the world, like the self, is open, capable of change, and in constant need of being changed. When Rosa Luxemburg writes, “I, too, am a land of boundless possibilities,” the thought of a new socialism—a socialism of color and life—begins to emerge. It is precisely this thought that the tradition in which she plays such a fundamental role seeks to actualize.

## *Childhood and Youth*

Rosa Luxemburg was born in the small Polish city of Zamosc in 1871, the year of the Paris Commune. Her father was a middle-class Jew who was cosmopolitan in his views. Thus, he found Zamosc somewhat stifling and moved his family to Warsaw in 1873, the year in which Rosa would develop the hip affliction that would remain with her for the rest of her life. A Jew in Poland who spoke German at home, Rosa learned of Schiller, the Enlightenment, and cosmopolitanism in her family circle. Although it is true she lived with her brother in Warsaw during the revolution of 1905-1906, it would be too much to say that she remained on intimate terms with her family. She barely mentions them in her letters, and yet there was a tie. When, for instance, the father of her friend Hans Diefenbach fell ill, she advised Hans to return home. Indeed, Rosa Luxemburg could write to Diefenbach—the man closest to her toward the end of her life—that:

Later one always blames oneself bitterly for every hour which one took away from the old people. I wasn't lucky enough even to have done as little as that. After all, I constantly had to look after the urgent business of humanity and make the world a happier place. And so I received the news of my father's death in Berlin, where I had been wrangling with Jaurès, Millerand, Daszyński, Bebel, and God knows who else until the feathers flew. In the meantime, the old gentleman wasn't able to wait any longer. Probably he said to himself that there would be no sense anyway in waiting, however long he waited; after all, I never did "have time" for him or myself—and he died. When I came back from Paris, he had already been buried a week. Now, of course, I would be much wiser, but one is usually wiser after it's too late.

This tension between personal life and political commitment would remain with Rosa Luxemburg. And yet, she was able to stay on reasonably good terms with her family. For his part, her father was able to show a certain broadmindedness when Rosa, still in high school, became involved in radical politics.

Indeed, it was in high school that Rosa Luxemburg first became politically active. During this time she made the acquaintance of Martin Kasprzak, a founder of socialism in Poland, who was to die on the scaffold in 1905. She also joined the Proletariat party, which, like most of the East European socialist parties before the turn of the century, was highly centralized and patterned somewhat after the famous and terroristic Russian Narodnaya Volya (People's Will). Soon enough, Proletariat came under police surveillance and harassment. Thus, after leaving high school in 1887, Rosa Luxemburg escaped to Zurich. There she began her socialist apprenticeship in earnest; she read Marx and Engels for the first time and entered into the world of radical emigré life with its endless café colloquies, personal quarrels, and intense intellectual friendships. It was also in Zurich that she met her future lover and political mentor Leo Jogiches. The meeting would result in a stormy and intense relationship that would come to an abrupt end around 1906-1907, though their political collaboration was to last until Rosa's death in the midst of the Spartacus rebellion of 1919.

And then too, Zurich offered her its university. There Rosa would study mathematics, natural science, and political economy. Particularly in prison, she returned again and again to studying the natural sciences, although her central concern was always political economy. Rosa Luxemburg was immediately recognized as a brilliant student and her dissertation on the industrial development of Poland, written under the tutelage of Julius Wolf, received the rare

honor (at that time) of being published as a book.

Its argument served as a complement to and theoretical justification of the political position she had taken as early as her high school years. Rosa Luxemburg had always been opposed to a socialism that advocated Polish nationalism, and her dissertation sought to show that Polish industrial development was dependent upon the growth of the Russian market and Russian capitalism. This insight led her to stress the need for solidarity between Polish and Russian workers and to reject the need for Polish separatism.

The unity between the theoretical in Rosa Luxemburg's writing and the concrete needs of political practice formed early, and it was never broken. In concrete terms, the political implications that she drew from her economic research served as the theoretical basis for the journal *Sprawa Robotnicza* (*The Workers' Voice*), which Luxemburg and Jogiches founded in 1893. That same year, a strike wave encompassing 60,000 workers hit the city of Lodz. In the wake of these events, the Proletariat party joined with the Polish Workers' League to form the Socialist Party of Poland (PPS). This was the party that would fall more and more under the direction of the two men who were to become Rosa Luxemburg's arch-enemies within the movement for Polish socialism, Ignaz Daszyński and Josef Pilsudski. Like Mussolini, Pilsudski would later defect from socialism altogether and become the dictator of Poland in the twenties. It was this attempt to steer the PPS into the nationalist camp that led Luxemburg to support a new party that would oppose the PPS: the Social Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPL), the party to which she would devote herself for the rest of her life.

## *Apprenticeship*

The basic political thrust of the SDKPL involved a radical opposition to capitalism and nationalist reformism, coupled with a demand for solidarity between the Russian and Polish proletariat as the basis of a thoroughgoing internationalism. This opposition to nationalism has become one of the hallmarks of Rosa Luxemburg's brand of socialism. In contrast to the PPS and to what would become Stalinism with its slogan of "socialism in one country"—as well as to the contemporary Left's sometimes uncritical support of "national liberation"—Luxemburg realized that an equal partnership between nationalism and socialism was impossible. To be sure, Rosa, following Marx, believed in agitation within national boundaries. At

the same time, however, national boundaries and national identity could simply not be accepted as the political and cultural divisions of the proletariat, if the latter was to negate the bourgeoisie and its ideology.

Internationalism has often been accused of remaining abstract. Although it is true that all revolutions have used national symbols, it is also true that the Russian Revolution, which began as a national bourgeois revolution, deepened into an international and proletarian one. Although there would be many conflicts between Luxemburg and Lenin, both perceived the need for and demanded an international revolution, while consistently expressing their hatred of chauvinism. This was particularly the case in the period following the collapse of the Second International.

Rosa Luxemburg's critique of nationalism still retains a fundamental validity. Indeed, her analysis assumes importance both in terms of those revolutionary values that the contemporary Left seeks to foster and in regard to the type of society that it wishes to actualize. For Rosa Luxemburg saw that nationalism would chain the socialist movement to the ideology of that bourgeois class it seeks to oppose. She also realized that a purely "national" revolution would undermine socialism by tying the nation to a bourgeois economy that was becoming ever more interdependent and transnational. Finally, and perhaps most important, the simple acceptance of a nationalistic consciousness would necessarily prevent the proletariat from recognizing the fact that the nation state and nationalism are strictly historical phenomena that might, at any given time, become obsolete. The emphasis upon nationalism would thus effectively deny the possibility of creating an alternative to the bourgeois form of socioeconomic organization and cripple the ability of the workers' movement to conceptualize the common humanity that socialism is to serve. This notion of a common humanity remained central to Luxemburg. Toward the end of her life, she could write to Mathilde Wurm:

What do you want with this particular suffering of the Jews? The poor victims on the rubber plantations in Putamayo, the Negroes in Africa with whose bodies the Europeans play a game of catch, are just as near to me. Do you remember the words written on the work of the Great General Staff about Trotha's campaign in the Kalahari desert? "and the death-rattles, the mad cries of those dying of thirst, faded away into the sublime silence of eternity."

Oh, this "sublime silence of eternity" in which so many screams have faded away unheard. It rings within me so strongly that I have no

special corner of my heart reserved for the ghetto: I am at home wherever in the world there are clouds, birds and human tears.

Emphasis upon internationalism need not lead to the abolition of specific cultures or languages. In fact, during her own school years, Rosa Luxemburg rebelled against the imposition of Russian and the ban on Polish. From such a position various cultural products become the possessions of the proletariat as a whole, and one's identity is no longer based upon the accident of birth within a specific race or area but instead upon membership in a class. Thus, from the very first, Rosa Luxemburg would embody her slogan, "the International is the fatherland of the proletariat." Consequently, when she sought entry into the world of international socialism, she was led to that country whose socialist party was the most advanced in theory and, by the lights of the age, closest to revolution. It was clearly the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) that served as the fortress of "orthodox" Marxism and the model for the entire Second International.

Robert and Mathilde Seidel—he the editor of the influential *Arbeiterstimme* (*Voice of the Workers*)—had introduced Rosa Luxemburg into German socialist circles in Zurich. Although still very young, she had achieved a minor level of renown as an expert on Poland and Russia after the publication of her dissertation. This was seen as making her somewhat valuable to the movement. Still, restrictions on German immigration were very tight, and Rosa was forced to make a marriage of convenience to Gustav Lübeck, the son of a Polish expatriate, shortly after finishing her thesis. This enabled her to make the move to Berlin, the city in which she would make her career as a social democrat, and also the city in which she would be brutally murdered in a revolt that was suppressed by the very same party she had initially held in such high esteem.

## *The East European Dimension*

Few individuals—Trotsky would be one of them—ever rose to fame in the socialist world as quickly as did Rosa Luxemburg. Still, she had to earn her spurs as a party worker, and thus it was that in 1898 the SPD sent her to Poznan—an area that she called "the boundary between civilization and barbarism" in one of her letters—to organize the Polish workers living on German soil. Traveling in the area proved exhausting, the incessant meetings tiring, and the organiza-

tional work mundane. Yet it all seemed to serve a function, even though the SPD was actually only using the SDKPL in its rivalry with Pilsudski's PPS.

Ultimately, the organizational efforts of both parties would prove a failure. But, with this initial trial that she bore so cheerfully, Rosa Luxemburg gained the practical credentials she needed as the party's expert on East European questions, as well as a mandate to attend the meetings of the International. Then, too, her experience was a factor when the movement chose her to sit on the commission that was to arbitrate the bitter quarrel that broke out between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in 1902.

Tension had existed within the Russian Social Democratic Party since its inception in 1898. This tension stemmed from the conflict between those who advocated trade-union activity and political reform within the framework of Russian economic development and those who sought to create a revolutionary proletarian class consciousness by stressing the need for autonomous political action on the part of the working class. Where most of the "orthodox" Marxists supported the "economist" view that Russia's coming revolution must be "bourgeois," Lenin became the leader of the younger and more political faction that held a more Jacobin conception of revolution.

For her part, Rosa Luxemburg tried to emphasize the need for unity between the two factions after the split. Yet, as this hope diminished, it becomes clear from her letters that, despite the ambivalent feelings that she had about Lenin and her dislike of the arrogance and intrigues of the Bolsheviks, she drew ever further away from the Mensheviks who ultimately became the champions of the PPS. Luxemburg's support of the Bolsheviks would never be uncritical; and yet, whatever the disagreements that would later arise between Lenin and Luxemburg, there was one point—a very decisive point—on which they could agree theoretically at this initial stage in the development of Russian socialism: the significance of the trade unions.

Already, in his now famous *What Is To Be Done?*, Lenin had recognized that trade-union consciousness could never be anything but reformist, that the emphasis upon economic benefits—to the detriment of political action—could not create a revolutionary consciousness among the working class, insofar as revolutionary consciousness is predicated upon the translation of economic demands into political ones. From this, Lenin concluded that there was a need for a revolutionary "vanguard" party, composed of a small number of dedicated revolutionary intellectuals, to introject the

required revolutionary consciousness into the working class “from without.” This was only logical in Russia, given the absence of a working class tradition and a “mass party” organization. From her own experience within the International, Luxemburg also realized that the party must dominate the trade unions if the proletariat was ever to act in an offensive and revolutionary manner. However, her political and theoretical conclusions differed from those of Lenin.

When Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* first appeared, it caused very little fuss in the West; in fact, it was only translated into German in the twenties. But, from the very first, Rosa Luxemburg saw the importance of Lenin’s statement. Her response to it and to Lenin’s *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* occurs in one of her most important essays, *The Organizational Question of Social Democracy*. In this work, the emphasis falls upon the need for a mass party—in accordance with the tradition of Western social democracy—and upon the necessity for democracy within the party as the method for building revolutionary consciousness. The party can seek to influence the masses, but it should not have the hubris to rule them. Although the differences between Luxemburg and Lenin’s views on the relation between party and mass can be overdrawn, still for Luxemburg consciousness cannot be manufactured and then introjected into the masses from the outside. Instead, it must emerge in action from the development of the proletariat in its self-conscious opposition to the bourgeoisie.

This emphasis is precisely what led Rosa Luxemburg to the stance that she took in 1905 on the “mass strike.” Initially two points become important in considering the mass strike debate. The first is that Rosa Luxemburg did not invent the theory of the mass strike, for it had long been the central concern of the anarcho-syndicalists. Indeed, it was not she, but Parvus, who had originally formulated the mass strike theory in Marxian terms. Secondly, the year 1905, which is usually seen as marking the beginning of the mass strike revolt in Russia, was itself a culmination rather than a beginning. In 1902 a wave of strikes had hit Batum. In December of that year the strikes spread to Rostov-on-Don, and 1903-04 saw widespread striking first in Baku and then in Tiflis, Odessa, Kiev, and other cities. It was in 1905, however, that the strike of 140,000 workers in St. Petersburg resulted in the creation of the St. Petersburg Soviet, which elected the youthful Trotsky as its president.

News spread slowly to the West, but discussion began and reached a crescendo in the party convention of 1905 when August Bebel brought the matter up for discussion. Luxemburg took the most

radical stance in support of this experiment in proletarian self-rule. She was backed by the more hesitant Kautsky and Bebel, who viewed the mass strike as a defensive tactic. The response in the bourgeois press was nothing less than outrageous. Luxemburg was castigated as a Jew, a woman—and what was perhaps the worst—as a hypocrite. A man of no less stature than the Reverend Friedrich Naumann, a leader of the “liberal” Progressive Party, attacked her personally for supporting the bloodshed in the East while sitting safely in Germany.

But, after the convention, Rosa Luxemburg—under the pseudonym Anna Matschke—left immediately for Warsaw, then still a part of the Russian empire, where revolution was also in progress. There she worked to put out *Czerwony Sztandar*, which was often, as she wrote to the Kautskys, “carried out by force, with revolver in hand, in the bourgeois printshops.” The *Sztandar* had originally been established by Leo Jogiches in 1902 as the popular organ of the SDKPL, while 1905 marked the first publication of *Przegląd Socjaldemokratyczny*, which would serve the party’s theoretical needs.

By 1906, the tsarist police had arrested Rosa. She faced a long prison term, but connections made it possible for her to be released on the 3,000 rubles that her father and the SPD had raised for bail. It was no secret to the authorities that she would jump bail, yet she wrote: “My friends absolutely insist that I telegraph [Premier Sergei] Witte, and that I write the German Consul here. I wouldn’t think of it! These gentlemen can wait a long time before a Social Democrat asks them for protection and justice. Long live the revolution!” What emerges here is not simply inflated pride, but a perception of a social democracy that stands implacably opposed to the bourgeoisie. No quarter is to be asked from the enemy, for that friction necessary for proletarian class consciousness must continually be emphasized if the proletariat is to view itself as “sovereign.”

Rosa Luxemburg’s concern for democracy should not obscure this hatred of the bourgeoisie. Democracy can never be actualized under the material exploitation of the capitalist system; the exploitative system and the bourgeoisie have to be suppressed, but they can only be suppressed by the dictatorship of a class—not the dictatorship over a class by a small group of party leaders—that demands the actualization of democracy in the socioeconomic, as well as in the political, realm. Only in this manner can the sovereignty of the proletariat be assured.

It is this type of self-contained proletarian sovereignty that underlies Rosa Luxemburg’s theory of the mass strike, and even of the



relation between the party and the masses. The mass strike for Luxemburg was neither the apex of revolution, as it was for the anarchists, nor a “myth” in Sorel’s sense. Rather, the mass strike was a stage within the revolutionary conflict itself. During that stage, the artificial division between political and economic organization could be overcome and the proletariat could begin the manifold social experiment of organizing itself in new ways.

## *The Revolutions in Russia*

Rosa Luxemburg feared “putschism,” as did all Second International social democrats. Unlike most of these same social democrats, however, she also feared the power and hubris of the party apparatus. The mass strike was the means whereby the proletariat would avoid falling into either of these organizational dilemmas, while directly attacking the bourgeoisie. Although Rosa Luxemburg was delighted and amazed at the manner in which workers’ organizations sprang up by themselves in 1905, it is too much to say—as is often said—that she prized spontaneity pure and simple, or that she believed that organization does not precede action but rather is itself the result of such action.

For Rosa Luxemburg, organized preparatory work was always essential. But, in her view, this preparatory work—which in itself demanded party organization—was to be designed to foster the proletarian class consciousness necessary for revolutionary action. This action, in turn, would itself create new forms of organization through the self-administration (*Selbsttätigkeit*) of the proletariat that would render the old organizational forms obsolete. In this way, the mass strike emerged in Rosa Luxemburg’s thought as the method by which the self-administration of the masses could be assured. Where, on the one hand, “putschism” would be avoided through the process of developing the revolutionary consciousness necessary to grasp objective revolutionary possibilities, on the other hand, bureaucratic degeneration would be avoided through the emphasis upon the subjective revolutionary action of the proletariat itself.

Practically speaking, Rosa Luxemburg’s hopes for the 1905 revolution could be condensed into one word: republic. The creation of a republic would make the Russian bourgeoisie accept the power that its counterpart did not accept in Germany in 1848. In other words, it would force the Russian bourgeoisie to remain loyal to the European revolutionary demands of 1789, and this itself would create

the preconditions for a deepening of proletarian class consciousness. Rosa Luxemburg viewed this as occurring via the exacerbation of the fundamental class contradictions within capitalism aided by the greater possibilities for propaganda and organization that a republic would provide.

The failure of the revolution, however, did not dampen Luxemburg's belief in the mass strike, and for a good reason: not only did the action force the creation of a Duma and so manifest the power of the proletariat, it also exposed the weakness of the bourgeoisie in the type of Duma that it proceeded to organize. In short, it became clear that "the manifold Russian liberal bourgeoisie is not able either to protect the given order from ruin or create a new, up-to-date legal or political order." Rather than retreating to a reformist course in the wake of the ensuing counterrevolution, if anything Rosa Luxemburg radicalized her views. Indeed, in a letter to the Latvian social democrats in 1908, she could write:

And so, after three years of the most difficult attempts, we find ourselves faced once again with the Gordian knot: neither the liberal bourgeoisie nor its artificial unification with the revolutionary proletariat can actualize the task of the Russian revolution. Only the independent activity of the proletariat as a class, supported by the revolutionary movement of the peasants, will be able to destroy absolutism and introduce political freedom into Russia. This is the most irrefutable and most important lesson from the history of revolutionary development.

Unfortunately, however, Rosa Luxemburg's European comrades did not agree. Instead, the increasing bureaucratic petrification, the new nationalism, and the Kautskyian "strategy of attrition" led to her defeat on the mass strike issue in 1910 and, perhaps more importantly, to a state of isolation on the Polish question that became complete in 1912.

The position that she put forward in 1908, however, was precisely the one that would inform her analysis up to and through the Russian Revolution of 1917. Sometimes critics of the revolution have sought to use Rosa Luxemburg's pamphlet *The Russian Revolution*—which was not published in her lifetime for fear of giving support to the counterrevolution—as a blanket condemnation of the Bolsheviks. Needless to say, Rosa Luxemburg herself did not see it that way. Indeed, she viewed the Russian Revolution as the potential "salvation" of Europe, and, like Lenin and Trotsky, saw the revolution in an international context. The Russian Revolution

would raise the curtain for the European Revolution. This was the crucial assumption for all of them, and Luxemburg's criticisms of Bolshevik tactics aimed above all to preserve this international perspective.

The destruction of the Second International was a horror, but it was precisely because of the constancy of Rosa's internationalism that she sought to revamp the Second International and resisted appeals to form a successor. Lenin perceived the lack of discipline and leadership as instrumental in the failure of the Second International with regard to the matter of World War I. He sought to remedy these deficiencies in a new communist international. Rosa Luxemburg, however, feared that this would lead to Russian hegemony and create a new nationalism in the name of internationalism—which it certainly did, even before Lenin's death in 1924. Then too, there were the residual effects of the Lenin-Luxemburg controversy over nationalism. In this debate, Lenin took the position supporting "national self-determination" while assuming that the proletarians of the Eastern countries would naturally wish to be allied with the Soviet Union. Essentially, the issue was a practical rather than theoretical one for Lenin insofar as he offered independence to nations over which the Bolsheviks held no control. This contrasted sharply with Luxemburg's stance on internationalism. As the war dragged on in Europe, however, Rosa Luxemburg continued to look with hope to the events in Russia. And yet she could criticize them at the same time. For her, Lenin was still a man and a comrade and not yet a god.

Her other criticisms of revolutionary policy are well known. There was the attack on the agrarian policy of the Bolsheviks—the policy that would unintentionally, and unknowingly, lead to the agrarian problem of the late twenties and thirties (for which Stalin would have his own solution). Then there was her criticism of Lenin's decision to dissolve the Constituent Assembly—an assembly which might have been able to coexist with the soviets but where the Bolsheviks were in the minority—even though the events in Germany would finally be decided in terms of *either* soviets or a parliament. Lastly, there was the critique of the abandonment—or at least constriction—of democracy and the Red Terror.

What Rosa Luxemburg did not do, in contrast to so many liberal critics of the Revolution, was to simply center her analysis of the events taking place in Russia on the Bolsheviks themselves. Rosa Luxemburg could write to Luise Kautsky that if the revolution failed in Russia, it would be because the European proletariat did not carry

through its own revolution to support the industrially backward Russians. Moreover, in a telling letter to Adolf Warski in 1918, she could even say of the terror:

To be sure, terrorism indicates fundamental weakness, but the terror is directed against internal enemies whose hopes rest upon the continuation of capitalism outside Russia, and who receive support and encouragement for their views from abroad. If the European revolution takes place, the Russian counterrevolutionaries will not only lose this support, but—more importantly—their courage as well. In short, the terror in Russia is above all an expression of the weakness of the European proletariat.

Whatever the other differences between them, Lenin and Luxemburg meet in their analysis of the importance of revolutionary action by the international proletariat for the success of the Russian Revolution. Even the most fundamental disagreements between them were disagreements between comrades, and respect was given on both sides. From Rosa Luxemburg's letters, it becomes clear that the degeneration of the Russian Revolution is not simply to be blamed on developments within Russia, but on the European workers' movement as well. In short, a particular proletariat has responsibilities that transcend its national boundaries and national concerns. For Rosa Luxemburg, this applied both to the Russians and to the Europeans. In dealing with either proletarian movement, however, Rosa Luxemburg emerged as an individual who was not afraid to criticize those whom she supported. With this criticism the truth becomes evident that the real revolutionary is never the blind fanatic. Instead, the revolutionary is the one who—while working for solidarity and consistently recognizing the fundamental difference between friend and foe—continually refuses to surrender that critical faculty which Rosa Luxemburg valued so highly.

## *A Revolutionary in the West*

When Rosa Luxemburg entered upon the social democratic scene in Germany in 1898, Karl Marx had already been dead for fifteen years, and the working class movement had entered a new phase of political development. The revolutions of 1848 had failed, the Paris Commune had been crushed, and the First International lay in ruins. The Second International arose from the ashes, and the SPD stood at the forefront of it. Formed in 1875, the SPD was the first of the modern