

# 100 years after the death of Rosa Luxemburg

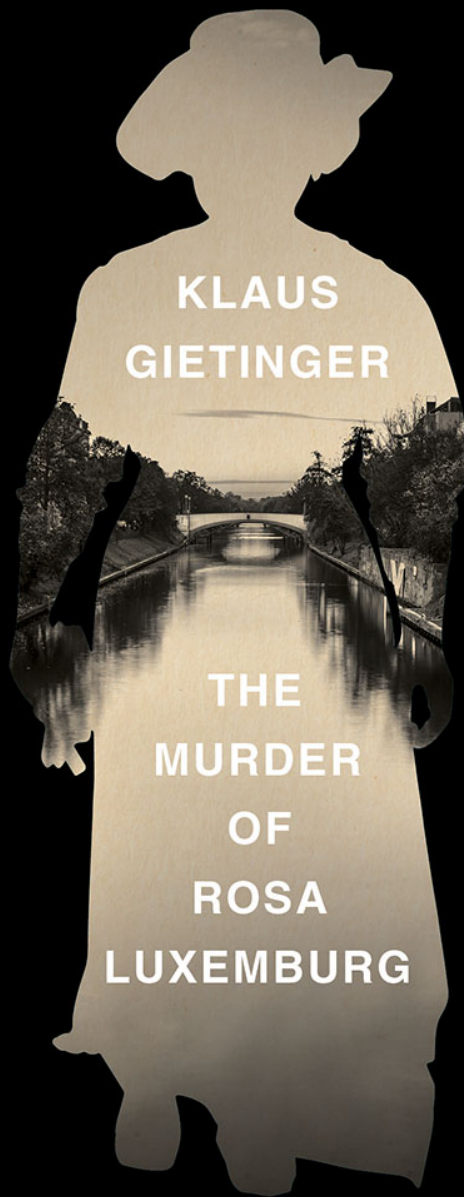


*The deaths of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht have haunted the imagination of the left for a century. **Joe Sabatini** reviews a recent publication exposing the events of their deaths, Klaus Gietinger's *The Murder of Rosa Luxemburg*, as well as providing an introduction to some of the literary works inspired by the events of 15 January 1919.*





'Intrepid, incorruptible, passionate and gentle . . .  
Rosa Luxemburg was one of the immortals'  
—JOHN BERGER



*The Murder of Rosa Luxemburg*, in a new translation by Loren Balhorn, published by [Verso](#)

On 15 January 1919 Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were brutally murdered by a group of far-right paramilitaries, acting on instruction from the government.

The events surrounding the killings have remained shrouded in controversy. A particular sore point has been the degree to

which the killings were the random result of far-right paramilitaries exceeding their brief, or a direct result of the Social Democratic Party government's wish to rid itself of its far-left. Even 100 years on the Social Democrats have refused to come clean about the killings, neither apologising nor condemning key leaders in the party who were responsible for putting down the German Revolution of 1918-19.

The German documentary maker Klaus Gietinger has spent much of the past 20 years unearthing details. His book *Eine Leiche im Landwehrkanal: die Emorderung Rosa Luxemburgs* ([A Corpse in the Landwehr Canal: the murder of Rosa Luxemburg](#)) is the most painstaking account of the events, drawing on meticulous archival research and interviews with some of the last surviving participants in the events.

The work forensically unpicks the events of the night, and exposes the cover ups that followed. Most crucially Gietinger follows the subsequent careers of the unit involved in the killings, showing both their links to the German deep state, but also the growing fascist movement and how they sustained those links across an international network up to and beyond the second world war. In other words, his book underscores the alliance of Social Democrats and a particularly hard-core far-right element in the military who were responsible for the killings 100 years ago.

### **Political events leading up to the killings**

In November 1918 the Germans were defeated in the First World War. Rather than admit defeat, the generals handed power to the Social Democratic Party to negotiate an armistice, while the military line disintegrated as German soldiers embraced the red flag of revolution and made their way back to their homes to set up Soldatenräte, or Soldiers Councils. The naval garrison in Kiel were ordered to set sail to fight a suicidal last stand against the British and mutinied, taking over the town and marching on Berlin.

By 9 November the capital was awash with crowds, the Kaiser had fled and the Social Democrat Scheidemann declared a republic from a balcony in the Bundestag to a cheering crowd. Unbeknownst to him the revolutionary Karl Liebknecht declared a socialist republic from a balcony of the Kaiser's palace that had been occupied by sailors. This set in-train a division between the Social Democrats who supported the military and the internationalists who had taken inspiration from the Russian Revolution.

Liebknecht and Luxemburg had been political prisoners and were released as the prisons were broken open. Once released they promptly got to work, networking leaders of radical shop stewards and other groups sympathetic to the Bolsheviks to form a new German Communist Party.

Their activity took place amidst the most militant mass mobilisations Germany had ever seen. On Christmas Eve, the sailors who had occupied the Kaisers palace were attacked by loyalist troops under orders from the Social Democrats. Amidst the shootings, massive numbers of workers came out in support of the sailors beating back the loyalists.

Just over a week later, the government's next move was to sack Berlin's revolutionary chief of police who been installed during the November events by workers and soldiers occupying the police headquarters. Again, the masses turned out, waiting for instructions. But this time there was no flashpoint, and most of them drifted home, leaving a smaller more militant core to attempt an insurrection.

The young Communist Party backed the insurrection and found themselves suddenly fighting against the Freikorps – paramilitary units made up of elite officer corps and far-right elements. With the full support of the Social Democrats, the Freikorps were given a free hand to clean up the city, and within days thousands were rounded up and many summarily executed.

Top of the wanted list were Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Since before the First World War both had been the most outspoken political figures against German militarism. Despite being marginalised during the war years, many viewed the events as vindicating their position and they had become figures of hatred both for the right and the Social Democrats who saw them as a thorn in their side.

### **The events of 15 January**

On 15 January Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were apprehended and taken to the luxury Hotel Eden, where a colonel Pabst and his division of the Freikorps had established their base.

On apprehending them Pabst telephoned Emil Noske, the Social Democratic Party minister responsible for putting down the revolution and asked if he was to have them shot. Noske informed him to do what he has to do. Pabst then ordered in several of his entourage to make arrangements to have Liebknecht taken out by one group and executed and then another group to take Luxemburg and have her executed.

Liebknecht was led out to a car and smashed over the skull with a rifle butt, before being bundled inside and driven to a park where he was shot, then dumped at the door of the Berlin morgue.

Luxemburg was defiant to the last, insolently replying to the questions put to her by Pabst during her interrogation. Then she was led out through the lobby where guests taunted her calling her a whore, before being dragged out to a waiting car, where she was cracked twice on the skull with a rifle butt and then was driven off. As the car rounded the corner a figure jumped on the runner board and, at close range, reached through with a pistol and shot her through the head. This killed her instantly and she was then taken to the Landwehr Canal and dumped into the icy water. Her corpse remained

undiscovered until the summer.

## **Controversy**

Immediately on the announcement of their deaths, the German establishment began a cover up that continues to this day. First, they tried to blame the crowd of guests in the Hotel, then when a Communist Party investigation resulted in the discovery of potential suspects and their temporary imprisonment, the soldier thought responsible for Luxemburg's death, was sprung from prison by a leading jurist who had falsified papers and shipped the suspect out of the country (the same network in the deep state scuppered attempts to have him extradited).

Several investigations were conducted by supporters of Luxemburg during the Weimar Republic, but they led to inconclusive results.

During the Nazi period the suspects who were briefly imprisoned were financially compensated, and most involved went on to have important careers in the Nazi movement, and especially in making contacts with international fascists.

After the war most of the key suspects continued to operate, many involved in international arms trade deals, building on the shadowy far-right networks they had nurtured during the Nazi years.

In the 1950s and 1960s Pabst went on the record for the first time to confirm that officers acting on his instruction had carried out the killings and that he masterminded the operation. He also identified the identity of the unknown person who had killed Luxemburg, Hermann Souchon, who went on to live until 1982.

Souchon vehemently denied this, and a TV dramatization of the events based on Pabst's account resulted in a legal case which the TV station lost, resulting in the series remaining banned



in Germany.

To this day, the German state and the SPD has failed to take responsibility for the killings of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

### **Alfred Döblin's *Karl and Rosa***

Alfred Döblin was one of Germany's great modernist writers, whose *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) carried out similar literary experiments as James Joyce had done with *Ulysses*. As a left-wing Jew and modernist, he fled the Nazis and ended up in Hollywood in the same émigré group that included the Frankfurt School, Thomas Mann and the composers Schönberg and Stravinsky. In exile, he wrote a four-volume work on the German Revolution – *November 1918*. Stretching to about the same length as *War and Peace* the novel gave the same scope and depth to the German Revolution as Tolstoy did to the events around the Napoleonic War. Added to this there is an element of magical realism and surrealism that make this work extraordinary for its time.

The final volume *Karl and Rosa* gives a close-up version of their final days. The novel is one of the finest historical novels of the 20th century and deserved a far greater readership. A translation was produced in the 1970s, and copies can be found second-hand.

### **Jonathan Raab's *Rosa***

For those wanting a quick page turner, I'd recommend Jonathan Raab's *Rosa*. Raab uses the basic tropes of a police procedural to link up the mysteries surround Luxemburg's death. It is based on the historical fact that when looking for Luxemburg's corpse in the Landwehr canal, the authorities found the corpses of three women and one man. *Rosa* takes the step of introducing a serial killer motif.

The novel stages tensions between the Kripo and the Polpo

(that is, the criminal and the political police) with the Kripas being the good guys wanting to catch a serial killer, even if he is one of the Freikorps, and the baddies being the Polpo, who want to limit any political damage.

Sadly, by throwing in serial killer motifs, the treatment detracts from the shocking reality of Social Democrats commissioning fascists to murder leading figures on the left.

One good thing about the novel is its rehabilitation of Leo Jogiches, who deserves a chapter in our memories of the period. In many ways he was a better organiser and strategist than Luxemburg and Liebknecht, had bitterly opposed the ultra-left turn of the early Communist Party, that exposed their leadership and was left to try and do something to bring the killers to justice. Sadly, in March 1919, he was tracked down by the same network behind Luxemburg and Liebknecht's killings and was murdered in police custody.

## **Biographies of Luxemburg**

There are three main biographies available in English. Paul Frölich's *Rosa Luxemburg* is written by a fellow member of the Spartakusbund, the group that helped to form the German Communist Party and combined first hand recollections and historical research. The second, John Nettle's *Rosa Luxemburg*, provides a more comprehensive account of her thought and influence. Elizabetta Ettinger's *Rosa Luxemburg: A Life* is less politically committed than the other two, but more grounded in archive research and presents the most detailed biography in English to date.

Verso Books have published [Red Rosa](#), a graphic biography by Kate Evans, as well as a new series of Rosa Luxemburg's letters and her collected works, which is running so far to its [third volume](#).

Meanwhile work is ongoing among German scholars who are unearthing previously unpublished writings in German and

Polish, that may continue to shed new light on the most inspirational revolutionary leader.

*Originally posted at [rs21](#).*