

# Rosa Luxemburg: A Revolutionary Life



ROSA LUXEMBURG'S LEGACY IS VERY live, very relevant, and very contested. One of the ways to understand this particular political valence is to see her not only as an exceptional individual, which she surely was, but also as a figure who crystallized the social forces of her historical moment. And her far too short life, not quite half a century, spanned an era in Europe that saw the rapid development of industrial capitalism, with all its attendant horrors: imperialism and war, appalling conditions for workers, rapid and unsettling social transformations, devastating displacement of people, widespread poverty and hardships. But it also witnessed the unprecedented rise of mass socialist organization among the new working class. This global movement came closer to overthrowing the entire system and replacing it with socialism than any force in any other time in human history.

Luxemburg thus lived in a terrible time, but also one of great hope and possibility. And it is this sense of immense potential that Luxemburg represents: She embodies the best of that mass collective force for social change, and in doing so, continues to represent a threat to the establishment, even as she speaks to individuals and movements engaged in the struggle for a more just world. Although her life was cut short, her achievements were many, and I can't possibly do justice to them in this short space. But I will try to provide an overview and to flag some of the key moments and political contributions.

Luxemburg's early life, in Poland under the occupation of Russian tsarism, was shaped by the combined worst of old feudalism and young capitalism. She faced the oppression experienced by all Polish people, whose language and culture were restricted. Additionally, the Jewish community, of which she was a member, was further persecuted and denied basic civil rights. She suffered from a lifelong disability due to a mistreated hip complaint of her childhood. And she was a woman, at a time when the public political realm was overwhelmingly dominated by men. Many poisonous misogynous attacks were directed against her from the establishment and also from some in the socialist movement.

She was alert to class inequality and had no tolerance for oppression or discrimination of any kind. She was also opposed to all kinds of sectionalism or cultural nationalism—the idea that only those suffering a particular oppression can understand or challenge it—because she saw inequality and chauvinism as integral to capitalism and therefore damaging to all sectors of the working class. She advocated a politics of solidarity.

Even while still at school, she joined the illegal socialist movement. She was a superb student, but she was denied the gold medal that she should have been awarded due to her 'rebellious attitude toward authorities.' When her activities became known to the authorities she had to escape Poland, and she was to remain outside her country of birth for most of her life. She went first to Switzerland and the University of Zurich, which was known as the "alma mater of young radicals," and went on to earn a PhD in economics—unheard of for a woman at this time. In the alternative school of socialist politics, she helped organize in exile the clandestine revolutionary group Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, which resembled, and at many points worked closely with, the Russian Bolsheviks.

Luxemburg went next to Germany in order to join the SPD

(Germany's Party of Social Democracy). So in her life she was actually a leader of socialist movements in three countries—Germany, Poland, and Russia—as well as the Socialist International, which was the world-wide federation of socialist groups.

The SPD was the largest party in the Socialist International, and it was rapidly transforming at the turn of the century. Brutally suppressed under the regime of Bismarck, and subject to the anti-socialist laws that were in place between 1877 and 1890, in 1891 the newly legal party established the twin goals of the so-called Erfurt Program, named for the town where it was drawn up. These were the “maximum program,” which was socialist revolution, and the “minimum program,” which meant reforms in the here and now.

In the context of a politically conscious working class, the SPD grew dramatically in the following decades, both in sheer numbers and in influence in the formal political establishment. In 1881 the party won 6 percent of the votes in the Reichstag (the German equivalent to the House of Representatives); in 1903 it held more than 30 percent. By 1912 it was the largest party, and by 1914 it had more than a million members. These were impressive achievements, but the institutional growth also had a paradoxically conservatizing impact. As the party grew, so did its investment in the system and its financial coffers, and sections of the leadership became more focused on getting votes and burnishing their official reputation than on struggles for liberation. A permanent bureaucracy developed, a body of people who were well paid, largely separated from the members, and accustomed to being part of the establishment.

These were the conditions that led to a distinct tendency known as revisionism, reformism, or opportunism. An eminent member called Eduard Bernstein had become a spokesperson for this wing. He (rather prematurely at the turn of the twentieth century) argued that capitalism had resolved its crises, wars

were a thing of the past, and a revolution was no longer necessary because all social problems could be solved through gradual reforms and change “from within” the system.

Rosa Luxemburg showed up in 1898, a total outsider—a woman, a Pole, a Jew, physically small, walking with a limp—and became the most outspoken revolutionary opponent of revisionism. She responded to Bernstein in a stunning series of articles that were later published as *Reform or Revolution* (1908). This work remains essential reading for those engaging in contemporary political debates about the reformability of capitalism.

One of my favorite passages gives a flavor of her wonderfully figurative rhetorical voice. She compared the reformists to earlier “utopian socialists” such as Charles Fourier, who advocated socialism through cooperatives, known as phalansteries:

Fourier’s scheme of changing, by means of a system of phalansteries, the water of all the seas into tasty lemonade was surely a fantastic idea. But Bernstein, proposing to change the sea of capitalist bitterness into a sea of socialist sweetness, by progressively pouring into it bottles of social reformist lemonade, presents an idea that is merely more insipid but no less fantastic. (*Reform or Revolution*, 65)

She argued that, far from choosing a different path to socialism, the reformists had actually jettisoned the goal of social transformation altogether in favor of making peace with the system.

*Reform or Revolution* argues that capitalism is built on exploitation and oppression—they aren’t optional but integral to the system. So too is class domination embedded in the economy—it isn’t something that is legislated and therefore it can’t be abolished through laws. And the political and legal systems are not neutral, but rigged in favor of the propertied classes. Socialism is about the establishment of a new

society, one that no longer rests on capitalist accumulation and wage labor—and revolution is the only way to secure a world without class domination and oppression.

Luxemburg did not, however, downplay the importance of immediate political struggles. She argued that socialists should make use of all available rights in order to win reforms that are crucial and valuable in themselves, because they may help alleviate suffering and defend against further attacks. But she held that these struggles are just as important as means to the end of overthrowing capitalism. She thus had a very dialectical understanding of the interplay between the processes. (In this and following quotations, “proletariat” is a synonym for the working class, the oppressed majority, that was widely used during this time.)

Democracy is indispensable to the working class, because only through the exercise of its democratic rights, in the struggle for democracy, can the proletariat become aware of its class interests and its historic task. In a word, democracy is indispensable not because it renders superfluous the conquest of political power by the proletariat, but because it renders this conquest of power both *necessary* and *possible*. (*Reform or Revolution*, 93)

In other words, the movement should employ, defend, and extend whatever rights and freedoms are available, without being under the illusion that they will “tame” capitalism or on their own lead to socialism.

Luxemburg won the debates with Bernstein, but the forces of reformism nonetheless continued to grow in the party. The next major battle that this produced came in 1905, when revolution broke out in Russia in what came to be known as the “great dress rehearsal” for 1917. Luxemburg traveled to Russia at great personal danger in order to play a leading role. In fairly short order the revolution was crushed, and Luxemburg along with Lenin and countless others spent a period in

prison. But the momentous events of 1905 gave a sense of how much could be achieved from the mass concerted efforts of workers. When she was able to return to Germany, Luxemburg went on a speaking tour that brought the lessons to the public, and she distilled these in her book *The Mass Strike* (1906).

This work was also an intervention in debates about the trade union movement, and it too speaks to contemporary labor politics. The German trade unions had been going through the same tremendous growth as the party, and as for the SPD, this brought both many successes but also conservatism. Some among the permanent bureaucracy now espoused "safe," "bread and butter," economist unionism, arguing that unions should steer away from controversial political issues and distance themselves from socialism. Like the SPD reformists, they feared radical action that could escape their control, rock the boat, and offend the establishment. They too now saw the building of the unions as an end in its own right, rather than a means to defend workers' rights in the present while helping the struggle for a new society in the long term.

Luxemburg saw in the Russian revolution of 1905 a counter-model. First, she observed that revolutionary struggle flows fluidly between the "economic" and the "political": Political demands turn to wage demands and vice versa in quick succession. Second, mass strikes achieve more in days than can be accomplished in years or decades of carefully planned union and parliamentary organizing. And finally, even when the particular strike or movement is defeated, and even if some of the gains are rescinded, the struggle itself does something that can't be taken away:

The most precious, because lasting, thing in this rapid ebb and flow of the wave is its mental sediment: the intellectual, cultural growth of the proletariat, which proceeds by fits and starts, and which offers an inviolable guarantee of their further irresistible progress in the economic as in the

political struggle. (*Mass Strike*, 134)

This speaks to the mass strike wave that is sweeping the United States today, the “Red for Ed” teachers’ strikes. All of Luxemburg’s lessons can be seen here: the movement between political and economic demands; the rapid achievement of victories that have seemed unthinkable for decades; and the political education that happens in the process of struggle, which is lasting and feeds into future movements.

Of Luxemburg’s many important contributions, one of the most central was her principled internationalism. She opposed nations and borders, and argued that workers share bonds of interest and solidarity far greater than anything they have in common with their respective ruling classes. Stemming from this was her rejection of nationalism, chauvinism, racism, and discrimination. She also saw how imperialism and militarism are integral to capitalism, and campaigned against all forms of imperialism and war.

At the outbreak of World War I, most of the leaders of the Second International betrayed the principle of international solidarity on which they were founded and lined up with the war efforts of “their own” ruling classes. When the leadership of the SPD, including her one-time close comrade Karl Kautsky, voted to support the war, Luxemburg condemned their actions with searing irony, referencing Marx’s famous slogan, “Workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains”:

For the proletariat there is not one vital rule, as scientific socialism has hitherto proclaimed, but rather there are two such rules: one for peace and one for war. In peacetime the class struggle applies within each country, and international solidarity vis-a-vis other countries; in wartime it is class solidarity within and the struggle between the workers of the various countries without. The global historical appeal of the *Communist Manifesto* undergoes a fundamental revision and, as amended by Kautsky, now reads: Proletarians of all countries,

unite in peacetime and cut each other's throats in war!  
("Rebuilding the International," 202)

Despite this crushing betrayal, however, Luxemburg did not collapse but rather joined with other revolutionaries to build a new movement that carried forward the principles of internationalism and anti-imperialism with the slogans "end the war by strikes" and "the main enemy is at home."

Luxemburg spent most of the war in prison, and her letters from a series of increasingly bleak cells are moving testimony to the human spirit under extreme duress. They show that her revolutionary drive came from great compassion, powers of empathy, and respect for humanity and all life, including animals and the natural world. She always maintained a vision of an alternative and saw the potential in life, even at the bleakest of times.

Her *Junius Pamphlet* (1916), written in prison, remains one of the most powerful anti-war statements of all time. It is almost impossible not to see today's crises in Syria or Yemen in her description of a world at war:

Business is flourishing upon the ruins. Cities are turned into shambles, whole countries into deserts, villages into cemeteries, whole nations into beggars, churches into stables; popular rights, treaties, alliances, the holiest words, and the highest authorities have been torn into scraps. ... Shamed, dishonored, wading in blood, and dripping with filth, thus capitalist society stands. Not as we usually see it, playing the roles of peace and righteousness, of order, of philosophy, of ethics—but as a roaring beast, as an orgy of anarchy, as a pestilential breath, devastating culture and humanity—so it appears in all its hideous nakedness. (*Junius Pamphlet*, 262)

When she was released from prison she threw herself into the German revolution, a tremendous mass movement that ended the war and, with the revolutions underway in Russia and globally,



held out the prospect of deep social transformation. She helped to found the German Communist Party and continued to agitate and organize.

Meanwhile the reformist wing of the SPD had come to power, and as Luxemburg predicted in her critique of reformism, the leaders now played a counter-revolutionary role, defending the establishment against the working-class movement. In January 1919 the revolution was dealt a massive blow, with the massacre of workers in Berlin on the orders of the Social Democratic government. The vicious Noske Guard, the core of what would grow into fascism, arrested Luxemburg and her close ally Karl Liebknecht. They were interrogated, beaten, and murdered. Luxemburg's body was weighted and thrown into the canal, not to be found for several months.

When reaching this part of Luxemburg's biography it is hard not to be overwhelmed with heartbreak and despair. But even within this devastating moment, Luxemburg provided future hope. Her final essay, "Order Reigns in Berlin," draws out the lessons of January 1919 with stunning clarity and points a way forward:

The leadership failed. But the leadership can and must be created anew by the masses and out of 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 task. They fashioned this "defeat" into a part of those historical defeats which constitute the pride and power of international socialism. And that is why this "defeat" is the seed of the future triumph. ("Order Reigns in Berlin," 378)

As this indicates, Luxemburg was to the end a brave revolutionary fighter who stood up to tyranny, and first and foremost, she was an activist, always rooted in working-class struggle. For this she won the lasting respect of the rank and file of the socialist and labor movements. Unlike the right

wing of the SPD, who ended up running the system their party was founded to challenge, Luxemburg never became isolated from the ordinary working-class men and women in the broader movement. Instead, she drew from it and gave it permanent expression in her written work.

Finally, Luxemburg characterized the alternatives facing humanity as that between “socialism or barbarism.” A century later we see the barbarism of capitalism on a daily basis: in the criminalization and incarceration of men, women, and children seeking refuge from war and poverty; in the continued dispossession of colonized people; in the relentless attack on working-class lives and working conditions in “rich” and “poor” countries alike; in the pervasive sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression that impact all areas of life; and in the ecological devastation facing our planet.

But so do we see heroic struggles and resistance from workers and oppressed people globally: Palestinians standing up against the Israeli state, mass uprisings in Sudan and Algeria, opposition to the resurgence of fascism, the #MeToo movement breaking the silence around sexual abuse, teachers in “Red for Ed” fighting for their students’ lives. The current renewed interest in socialism offers the potential to build isolated struggles and connect them to a broader movement. We are also witnessing a resurgence of interest in Rosa Luxemburg, as exemplified by the Verso *Complete Works* project, which is publishing a wealth of material previously unavailable in English (Hudis 2014). This is a welcome development, because the legacy of Luxemburg, with its record of victories, losses, mistakes, and profound insights, has an important part to play in the daunting but essential project of social transformation.

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