



## **Rosa Luxemburg:**

# **Revolutionary Theoretician**

By Lee Tracey

Published by News & Letters - Women's Liberation Committees  
48207.

NEWS & LETTERS  
2832 East Grand Blvd. #316  
Detroit, Michigan 48211

50¢

4912

4 9 1 3

The emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement has brought forth the demand for a total re-examination of the role of women in revolutionary history. Rosa Luxemburg has been especially singled out. As one of only a handful of women recognized in revolutionary history at all, she stands alone in being the only woman recognized as a major theoretician of the socialist movement.

The new interest in Luxemburg has been witnessed not only by the publication of an excellent, definitive biography of her life and works by Peter Nettl (Rosa Luxemburg, Oxford Paperbacks, \$3.75), but also by the re-publication and translations of some of her major works, including Accumulation of Capital.

Hopefully, the new availability of her works will help to rescue Luxemburg from the polemical morass which has surrounded her name since her martyrdom at the hands of the German counter-revolution in 1919. For, despite her universally acknowledged position in revolutionary history, and despite the fact that she has been paid lip-service by all varieties and colorations within the Left -- from Stalinists to Social-Democrats -- her ideas have rarely been dealt with on their own merits. In the heat of factional disputes, much has been erroneously attributed to her, while a great many of her own, original, ideas have been totally ignored. Thus it becomes crucial to re-establish Luxemburg on her own terms.

In analyzing Luxemburg's works and role in revolutionary history we must first confront the fact that she was the only woman theoretician to emerge in the socialist movement. And this was true despite the fact that the "Woman Question", as it was traditionally referred to in socialist writings,

-2-

did play an important role in the development of socialist thought, not only in Marx's philosophy, but in that of "pre-Marxian" radicalism. The Woman Question, for example, had a fundamental effect upon the development of Russian radicalism in the 19th century.<sup>1</sup> But the fact is that Luxemburg herself did not play a major role in the women's section of the Social Democratic Second International, although she certainly was in close touch with its activities through her association with Clara Zetkin, a leader of the women's movement and a staunch revolutionary socialist.

To fully understand the genesis of Luxemburg's political thought, it is necessary to look to the organizational forms in which she participated and in which her own development took place.

#### THE BATTLE AGAINST BERNSTEIN'S REVISIONISM

Born in Russian Poland in 1871, Luxemburg joined the revolutionary movement there at the age of 15. Despite Tsarist-forced exile, she was to work continuously for the Polish revolution until her death, first in the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) then, after leading a split from that group, in the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland (SDKP, later, with the adhesion of Lithuania, SDKPiL). With the creation of the SDKP, Luxemburg established herself as a theoretician to be reckoned with in the international socialist movement. She was the main theoretician of the

1. This point is developed by Robert H. McNeal in his biography of Krupskaya, Bride of the Revolution (U. of Michigan Press, 1972) where he notes that the two "bibles" of the radical intelligentsia of the period were Alexander Herzen's Who Is To Blame?, and Chernyshevsky's novel, What Is To Be Done? Both dealt, not with the burning question of the peasantry as would be expected, but with "the bondage of another large category of humankind -- women" (p. 3). It should be stated that McNeal's work is far more valuable for its discussion of the development of the Woman Question in Russian history, than for its treatment of either Krupskaya or Lenin, which frequently is most patronizing.

-3-

new Polish party (leadership, especially in organizational matters, was shared by her co-leader and life-long collaborator, Leo Jogiches).

In 1898, while in exile from Poland, Luxemburg went to Germany to work in the German Social Democratic Party, the largest socialist party in the world at that time. Her entrance into the German Party coincided with the outbreak of the now famous "revisionist" controversy, centering around Eduard Bernstein's theory of "evolutionary" socialism.

Bernstein and his adherents argued that capitalism could be "prodded" (by the socialists) into evolving into a reasonable and humane socialist system. Bernstein, under the guise of "revising" Marx to bring him "more up to date", made a wholesale attack on the entire foundation of Marxism. (He especially singled out Marx's dialectical method as being "un-necessary"). Bernstein's "bringing Marxism up to date" constituted a complete abrogation of the dialectical movement of history which Marx had demonstrated in Capital. Where Marx showed the class struggle to be the sole basis for the achievement of human liberation, Bernstein substituted the ballot box (electing Social Democrats to parliament who would then "vote" socialism into existence), and using a form of "moral persuasion" on the capitalists to curb their "greedy" excesses in exploiting the workers.

Needless to say, over seventy years of history -- including Roosevelt's New Deal and LBJ's War on Poverty -- have shown that, Bernstein's "evolution" to the contrary, capitalism has yet to transform itself into a human society. But, in the year 1898, his theory was beginning to influence a section of the German Left, particularly Social Democratic trade union officials and parliamentary representatives. (You can see where this leads. The leaders of the Second International today are: Willy Brandt, Golda Meir, Harold Wilson.)

4915

It was Luxemburg who led the attack and soundly trounced this first (but certainly not last) serious perversion of Marxism. In the pamphlet, Reform or Revolution she exposed the petit bourgeois class nature of Bernstein's theory, demonstrating that the basis of capitalism was not merely the "oppression" or impoverishment of the working class, but the actual capitalist relations at the point of production. Unless these relations were totally transformed, nothing, nothing whatever would change. She showed how the parliament, with its "ballot-box" democracy was a fraud, being merely the political apparatus for the oppression of the working class. She noted that, as soon as the parliamentary system began in any way to conflict with the interests of capitalism, the parliament, not capitalism, would be summarily abolished.

In her polemic, Luxemburg hammered away at the fact that the essence of capitalism is not merely the increasingly wretched life of the workers, not merely the existence of propertied and unpropertied classes, but the actual, real, human social relations at the very point of production itself:

By transporting the concept of capitalism from its productive relations to property relations, and by speaking of simple individuals instead of speaking of entrepreneurs, he (Bernstein) moves the question of socialism from the domain of production into the domain of the relations of fortune -- that is, from the relation between Capital and Labor to the relations between rich and poor.<sup>2</sup>

In Reform or Revolution, Luxemburg makes abundantly clear that capitalism is not merely a book-keeping arrangement, but a particular form of social relations among human beings which, by its own very process, creates the new forms of revolt which

2. Rosa Luxemburg, Reform or Revolution, Three Arrows Press, New York, 1937 edition.

must uproot it. It was Luxemburg's insistence on this, on the human, subjective force necessary to uproot capitalist society that distinguished her from every other theoretician in the German Party, whether they were for or against Bernsteinism per se.

Though Luxemburg's fierce polemical logic easily won the debate with revisionism, the question was not, unfortunately, "settled" for history. By 1914, the entire leadership of the German Party (and indeed of most of the Second International) was, in practice if not in theory, Bernsteinian. In the German Party, only Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht maintained the banner of Marxist internationalism. They were very much alone.

But the transformation of the German Social Democracy from revolution to reformism did not take place "suddenly" with their capitulation to the imperialism of World War I in 1914; it had its roots much earlier. The transformation into opposite showed itself as early as 1905 when the party leadership refused to comprehend the true revolutionary meaning of the 1905 Russian Revolution.

THE 1905 RUSSIAN REVOLUTION: THE CREATIVITY OF THE  
MASSES VERSUS THE PARTY TO LEAD -- THE MASS STRIKE.

What Luxemburg had established as a theoretic principle in the Reform or Revolution document of 1899 -- that mass activity, mass creativity, was the only path to socialism -- was concretized and deepened by her participation in the actual revolution of 1905. Her experiences in a real, thoroughgoing revolution laid the groundwork for a new theoretic breakthrough, the mass strike.

The 1905 Russian Revolution was so spontaneous, so unexpected, that not only the Tsarist forces, but the socialist revolutionaries -- Luxemburg and Lenin included -- were totally unprepared. Luxemburg, still in Germany, began writing

furiously of the Russian events, making the necessary connections with the German situation, and translating the spirit of revolution into the German. The general strikes which were bursting out in Russia and Russian-held Poland began to have their effect on German workers. And German workers, while never approaching the heights of the Russian, began "speaking Russian" in their increasing militancy and strike activity.

The term "mass strike" began to be seen even in the sedate journal of the German Social Democracy, Vorwärts. Party trade union officials, who had always silently supported Bernstein and reformism, began to attack Luxemburg for fomenting "adventurism" among the working class (by which they meant any strike activity not planned and controlled by themselves). The liberal newspapers, along with those of the Right, began their own attacks, slandering her as "Bloody Rosa". The German government arrested her for sedition, and she was given a one year sentence.

Late in 1905, impatient with only reporting and analyzing the revolution from afar, Luxemburg managed to smuggle herself into Russian Poland on a Tsarist troop train. Posing as Anna Matschke, a German journalist, Luxemburg made her way alone to Warsaw, into the thick of actual revolution. Reunited with her Polish Party comrades in Warsaw, she began a period of frenetic political activity. Luxemburg was very much in the forefront of the Polish events. Through dozens of speeches to party and trade union groups, and to mass rallies, and through her sharp and passionate polemical articles, she sought to raise the vision of the revolution. No arm-chair revolutionary, she thought nothing of "occupying" a print-shop and, gun in hand, forcing a reluctant proprietor to print a workers' leaflet.

At the time of Luxemburg's arrival in Poland, the revolution was at a turning point. The Tsarist officials were making a frontal assault on the masses. On one day it would appear as if the Tsar had succeeded in suppressing the mass movement,

yet on the next new waves of strikes would break out. Both the sheer size of the mass revolutionary activity and its fluidity were overwhelming; it concretized for Luxemburg the real nature of revolution and clarified the role of the revolutionary party. The 1905 revolution showed that the would-be "vanguard" party not only had not "begun" the revolution, but had had a difficult time keeping up with it. This was not a "fault" of the party, but rather a fact of real revolution. The role of a truly revolutionary party, as Luxemburg saw it, was not to attempt to organize, or to "set the date" for revolution, but rather to be with the revolutionary masses; to clarify, to analyze, to help the revolution push forward with the right objectives, slogans and perceptions of events. From her experiences in actual revolution, Luxemburg began to draw conclusions about the nature of the German SD Party: she saw that in both structure and theory it was out of touch with revolutionary reality and had to be changed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Despite the monumental force of the 1905 Russian Revolution, it was not able to go to completion. By February, 1906, the brutality of Tsarist repression had done its job; thousands were killed or imprisoned and, for the time being, the voices of revolt were stilled. In March of that year, as she was preparing to return to Germany, Luxemburg and her co-leader Jogiches were seized in a midnight police raid. "Anna Matschke's" true identity was soon discovered and she was sent to the infamous Pavilion X of the Warsaw Citadel, a fortress for political prisoners.

After staging a hunger strike which seriously damaged her health, and after family and friends, unbeknownst to her, had sufficiently bribed officials, Luxemburg was freed from prison in July, 1906. She was allowed to leave Poland for Finland.

Here she met with Lenin and other Polish and Russian exiles to analyze the events of the revolution and their significance for the future.

#### THE MASS STRIKE

Much has been made of the differences between Luxemburg and Lenin. On the National Question, and especially on Polish nationalism, these differences certainly did exist. However, both were absolutely united against reformism and for mass activity and spontaneity in revolution. The experiences of 1905 brought them close together, and they were to remain together on many of the questions facing international socialism.

It was during her stay in Finland that Luxemburg developed and wrote her theoretical analysis of the 1905 Revolution -- The Mass Strike. To this writer, the Mass Strike document represents one of Luxemburg's most important theoretic contributions to the revolutionary movement. Here she not only captures the monumental spirit of actual revolution, but singles out and emphasizes those aspects of the experience which were to be most crucial to the proletarian movement in the next revolutionary period -- that of 1917. It remains true, however, that unlike Lenin who, after the collapse of the Second International in 1914, returned to the roots of Marxism in the Hegelian dialectic to "work out" the new,<sup>3</sup> Luxemburg, insofar as she developed the theory of the of the relation between the masses in revolution and the party,

---

3. See Marxism and Freedom by Raya Dunayevskaya (Bookman & Assoc., N.Y. 1958; Pluto Press, London, 1971). Chapter X details Lenin's return to the Hegelian dialectic and subsequent re-organization of thought.

did so largely on instinct. Her instinct was in many ways magnificent, but insofar as her theory was not sufficiently grounded on the Hegelian-Marxian philosophic method of working out history, even her greatest moments somehow lack true completion. But the truth is that, until the publication of Lenin's State and Revolution, written following the February 1917 revolution, the Mass Strike stands out as the outstanding perception and description of mass self-activity and self-organization in revolution. Here she writes:

The revolution is not an open-field manoeuvre of the proletariat, even if the proletariat with social democracy at its head plays the leading role, but it is a struggle in the middle of incessant movement, the creaking, crumbling and displacement of all social foundations. In short, the element of spontaneity plays such a supreme role in the mass strikes in Russia, not because the Russian proletariat is "unschooled", but rather because revolutions are not subject to schoolmastering.<sup>4</sup>

It was to the would-be "schoolmasters" of the German Party leadership, as well as to the working class militants chafing at that leadership's restraints, that Luxemburg directed this thundering polemic. Party and trade union leaders trembled at the very thought of such mass, spontaneous activity as Luxemburg described. Revolutionary rhetoric to the contrary, the German Party leadership was approaching nearer and nearer to the camp of Bernstein and his parliamentarist theory. Fear of the mass strike, coupled with the European chauvinism which the Left did not escape, led

4. Rosa Luxemburg, The Mass Strike, quoted from an extract reprinted in International Socialism, No. 21, Spring, 1965. The entire document has been reprinted as The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions by A Young Socialist Publication, Colombo, Ceylon, 1967 (English trans.)

the leadership of the Second International, of which the German was the largest party, to refuse even to place the question of the 1905 Revolution on its agenda for the International Congress of 1907.

This incredible refusal even to discuss actual revolution, along with other events of the 1906-07 period, made it increasingly clear that the German Party leadership, as well as that of the whole Second International, was becoming more and more anti-revolutionary. For Luxemburg, this was a period of great disillusionment and despair. The party of which she was a member was the largest socialist party in history, having several million members and a sizable representation in the Reichstag. Yet this same party was opposing itself to revolution. At the same time, separation from that party was, for Luxemburg, separation from the masses and, as such, unthinkable.

#### ON ORGANIZATION AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION

Luxemburg was not herself an "organizational" person. As a theoretician and polemicist, she was constantly speaking to party and trade union groups, but she never attempted to weld her influence, which was great, into an organized, mass opposition to the degenerating leadership. That the group Spartakus, which only emerged after the complete betrayal of the Second International during World War I, had any base at all was due to the magnificent organizational work of Clara Zetkin, perhaps Luxemburg's closest personal and political comrade.<sup>5</sup>

---

5. The role of Clara Zetkin has too often been denigrated to that of a "faithful, loyal, but uncomprehending" friend of Luxemburg's. (See Nettl, p. 12). It is true that Zetkin was not a theoretician, and probably for the same reason that women have so rarely held that role. But Zetkin was crucial to the creation of the Spartakus group, and instrumental,

On the question of organization, Luxemburg's theory and her practice stood in contradiction. Although she took issue with Lenin's organizational conclusions in What Is To Be Done (written in 1903, before the experience of the 1905 Revolution), she was herself, as was the whole Polish group, exceedingly elitist in practice. As Peter Nettl describes it, the SDKPiL was, throughout most of its existence, "a head without a body." Frequently in exile, the leadership, which consisted of Luxemburg, Jogiches, and about five others, made all the decisions for the Polish Party at home.

Unfortunately, Luxemburg's disdain for organizational matters often prevented her ideas from having any serious effect on the direction of the German Party. It was not so much her belief in "spontaneity" within the Party -- as witnessed by the structure of her own Polish group -- but her failure to see the necessity of an active, working relationship between workers and intellectuals within the Party itself that led to this disregard of organization.

The point that Luxemburg missed in her critique of Lenin's What Is To Be Done, was the necessity for revolutionary intellectuals to be "disciplined" by the good working class sense of the proletariat within the party organization itself. The real difference emerges in that Luxemburg thought that the actual working out of theory within the party could take place separated from its proletarian members. Lenin did not. However, Lenin and Luxemburg were absolutely agreed that the theoretical role of the party was crucial, when, and only when, the party's theory was in real correspondence to the actual aspirations of the masses.

\* \* \* \* \*

5. (cont'd)

if not central, in organizing support for most of Luxemburg's oppositionist positions within both the German Party and the Second International. It is hardly likely that this could have been accomplished by one who was merely "loyal" and not a sharp political thinker in her own right. It is time that Zetkin's position be completely re-examined.

-12-

A comparable situation existed with respect to her position on the National Question. The original split of the SDKPiL from the Polish Socialist Party was based on the question of the relation of Poland, then divided into three parts, Austrian, German and Russian, to the mother countries. There was strong nationalist sentiment in Poland, but Luxemburg believed that a nationalist struggle there would only divert from the class struggle and socialist revolution.

Most of her writings on the National Question were directed to the Polish-Russian situation, rather than generalized to all nationalist struggles. They were based on her economic analysis of the relative degree of industrialization in Poland as compared to Russia. Poland was more industrialized than the imperialist Russia, and Luxemburg feared that the separation of Poland from Russia would impede capitalist development in the mother country, thus impeding socialist revolution. It appears that her view of the economic situation prevented her from seeing, as did Lenin, that a Polish struggle against Tsarist imperialism could greatly help in undermining the Tsarist autocracy, thus assisting proletarian revolution in Russia. Here, economics unfortunately beclouded the dialectics of revolution.

Her mechanistic interpretation of the National Question, which was shared by the majority of her Party, had severe repercussions for the whole Polish revolutionary movement. It effectively aided the reformist PPS Party, as it cut SDKPiL off from much of the Polish masses on this question.

Paradoxically, her own Polish party was totally "nationalist" when it came to its affairs; that is to say, SDKPiL refused to give up one iota of its political autonomy. It categorically refused to merge itself with the Russian Party -- witness to the fact that Polish nationalism was not a mere "clutching at the straws of history", but an actual force in the world, even in the world of revolution-

-13-

aries who denied its validity theoretically.<sup>6</sup>

But if the history of revolutions since Luxemburg's time has demonstrated her view of the National Question to be wrong, and a variety of opportunists have since distorted that view, it still must be remembered that throughout her life, Luxemburg was struggling against those who actually did wish to divert from the class struggle, reformists who did wish to divert from revolution.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the period 1906-09, Luxemburg's opposition to the German Party leadership, although not appearing in dramatic public polemics, was deepening. Her main activities consisted of teaching courses in the history of socialism and political economy at the newly established Party school. She was said to have been a magnificent teacher, even by those who opposed her. Work on economics for her courses yielded two theoretical works: one, a popularization, Introduction to Political Economy, the other, her best known work, Accumulation of Capital.

#### THE BREAK WITH KAUTSKY

Luxemburg continued to work as co-editor, along with Karl Kautsky, the most prominent theoretician of the German

6. It is likewise paradoxical that, while Luxemburg was so vehement on this National Question, when it came to herself, as a woman, she saw its revolutionary necessity: "Divorce is part of the National Question, and I'm for That" she said.

7. Luxemburg's major and most famous theoretic work, Accumulation of Capital was published in 1913. I do not take it up here both because of space and because it is analyzed in depth by Raya Dunayevskaya in State Capitalism and Marxist-Humanism, News & Letters, Detroit, 1967. Luxemburg herself considered the work to be purely "academic" and quite separate from her political writings.

Party, of the leading theoretical journal of the Second International, Neue Zeit. Her relationship with Kautsky, an ally throughout the revisionist controversy and a close friend since that time, was beginning to be strained. It was becoming clear that Kautsky, despite his revolutionary rhetoric, was coming to share the revisionist disease. Luxemburg broke with him completely in 1910. It was to take several years and the collapse of the Second International before Lenin was to discover Luxemburg's prescience about the "renegade Kautsky."

The break with Kautsky, necessary as it was, left Luxemburg almost totally isolated in the German Social Democratic Party. Always feared, if not hated, by the leadership (Bebel referred to her as "that poisonous bitch" who, nonetheless was "clever as a monkey"), they now had carte blanche to attack her.

The dispute which triggered Luxemburg's break with Karl Kautsky concerned that same issue which had placed Luxemburg in opposition to the German leadership as early as 1906 -- the Mass Strike. In 1910, the masses were once more showing signs of revolutionary outburst, and Luxemburg felt it imperative that the idea of the mass strike be raised anew. At the same time that the German working class was growing more restive, the European powers, and Germany in particular, were becoming increasingly militaristic. Various territorial skirmishes took place between the imperialist nations; there were incursions into Africa; actual war broke out in the Balkans in 1912.

By the early days of 1914, mass upheaval, political and economic, was increasing. Luxemburg seized the moment to begin concrete agitation on the question of the mass strike, arguing that it was this activity alone which could successfully combat militarism and imperialism. Ignoring the party leadership, she spoke to the masses: "If they think we are going to lift the weapons of murder against our

French and other Brethren, then we shall shout: 'We will not do it.'"<sup>8</sup> This speech yielded her a year in prison for "public disobedience of the laws," which she served in 1915. It was her anti-war agitation which brought her into close contact with Karl Liebknecht, the revolutionary who was to stand with her, in opposition to the Second International's betrayal, in the creation of the Spartakusbund, and ultimately in death.

#### WORLD WAR I AND THE YEARS IN PRISON

August 4, 1914, is quite possibly the most shameful date in revolutionary history. It was on this day that the German Social Democratic Party, through its representatives in the Reichstag, voted, against all the principles of international socialism, to support Germany's entry into World War I. Despite all the high-flown rhetoric of its anti-war resolutions at previous International Congresses, most of the socialist parties in Europe likewise voted to send their workers into war against each other. In August, 1914, the official International Socialist movement ceased to exist.

For revolutionaries such as Luxemburg, Liebknecht, and Lenin, this outright betrayal of socialism was almost impossible to comprehend. Everything Luxemburg fought so hard to prevent had come to pass: the German Social Democratic Party, indeed the whole Second International, had moved from Marxism and revolution to revisionism and counter-revolution.

Luxemburg, along with Zetkin, Liebknecht, and Karl Mehring, had maintained anti-war agitation up to the very day of the Reichstag vote. And despite their dangerous position in a country at war, they continued to carry on their opposition publicly. Their first action was to disassociate themselves from the Social Democratic Party in the eyes of the masses. An announcement of the existence of an opposition to the war within the German Party was published in

8. Peter Nottl, Rosa Luxemburg, paperback edition, p. 321

-16-

September, 1914.

The oppositionist group, then called Gruppe International, founded Die International as its organ of protest. By this time, March, 1915, Luxemburg was serving the jail sentence for her speech of the previous year. While in jail, she wrote what was the only totally anti-war oppositionist statement to come out of the entire German Party, the Junius pamphlet, so-called because of the necessary use of the pen-name "Junius." It was this document that Lenin acclaimed as being the only hope of the German Marxist Party. The Junius pamphlet, published in 1916, not only attacks the perversion of Marxism through which the German Party justified its support of the war, but also reveals her personal horror at the mutual massacre of the workers of Europe:

The railway trains full with reservists are no longer accompanied by the loud acclamations of the young ladies, the soldiers no longer smile at the populace out of their carriage windows... The cannon fodder inflated with patriotism and carried off in August and September, 1914 now rots in Belgium, in the Vosges, the Masurian swamps, creating fertile plains of death on which profits can grow. Hurry, for the rich harvest must be gathered in to the granaries -- a thousand greedy hands stretch across the ocean to help.<sup>9</sup>

Luxemburg was released from prison in January, 1916 only to be re-arrested in July of the same year. This prison term, her last, was to be the worst, both physically and mentally. By December, 1916, most of the Spartakus leadership, including Liebknecht, was likewise in jail. Leo Jogiches, who had assumed leadership of the Spartakus group in August, maintained the publication of the literature and the functioning of the organization almost single-handedly.

Despite the disarray of the oppositionist group, the tide was beginning to turn in Germany. Anti-war sentiment

<sup>9</sup>. Nettl, op. cit. p. 387

was growing. Even the Centrist faction in the German Social Democratic Party, led by Kautsky, which, in 1914 had declined responsibility for the war but had continued to provide its theoretical justification, was forced into a more active anti-war position. In January, 1917, Kautsky's faction actually split from the SPD to form the Independent Social-Democratic Party (USPD). Spartakus left with them in an uneasy alliance, but maintained its independent line.<sup>10</sup>

Luxemburg's two years in prison were not wasted. She used it as a period of personal investigation and turned to the study of botany and literature. Her work on economics was continued, and she kept up a vast correspondence, both personal and, when possible, political. One personal letter, written to Matilde Wurm, does much to reveal the passionate and biting temperament of its author:

...You wouldn't mind being radical, you say, only the trouble is that one gets put aside and can't be of use any longer. You miserable, pettifogging souls, you would be perfectly prepared to offer a modicum of heroism but only against cash, as long as you can see an immediate return on it; a straight 'Yes'; the simple words of that honest and straightforward man (Martin Luther): "Here I stand, I can do no other, God help me" -- none of it was spoken by you. Lucky that world history to date has not been made by people like you, otherwise there wouldn't have been any reformation and we would still be stuck with feudalism...<sup>11</sup>

10. Luxemburg opposed the split from the SPD, although she sanctioned it after the fact. Her opposition stemmed from her fear of being isolated from the working class. In her words, "The worst working class party is better than none." (Nettl, op cit. p. 405) Again, her lack of organizational perspective seems to have led her astray. On this question, she made the mistake of turning the masses into an abstraction, rather than trusting that they would seek the correct ideas, not the oldest or largest organization.

11. Nettle, op cit. p. 409

RUSSIA 1917; GERMANY 1918

The exact opposite of the reality which confronted Luxemburg in Germany existed in Russia. The most daring action in all of revolutionary history, the historic act which transformed Russia from Tsarist-feudalism to the first workers' state in history and established a new turning point for the entire world -- the Russian Revolution -- burst forth in February, 1917. From her jail cell, Luxemburg followed the Russian events breathlessly, critically and jealously -- for the Russians had dared, and the Germans had not.

Of all the misinterpretations, deliberate or otherwise, of Luxemburg's theoretical and political positions, none has been more perverted than her stand on the Russian Revolution. Because of her critical, revolutionary sense, the misinterpreters have made it appear as if she opposed the Russian Revolution. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact she said: "We are all Bolsheviks in this." What she did oppose was the Bolsheviks break with other Marxist parties and with their disbanding of the Constituent Assembly. Even if she was wrong in this, there is no doubt at all about her stand with the Bolsheviks and against the parliamentarists. She evidently thought, however, that the way to pursue democracy was through the retention of the Constituent Assembly.

Luxemburg also had differences with Lenin both on the Agrarian Question<sup>12</sup> and on the National Question, but her opposition was as an internationalist and one who had a

---

12. She considered the peasants "backward" and "by no means to be trusted" at a time when they were acting most revolutionary in seizing the land and estates.

passionate faith in the proletariat. It was precisely because of this that she hailed Lenin and Trotsky for proclaiming that the life of the Russian Revolution depended absolutely upon the world revolution.

She feared, however, that the Bolsheviks would maintain the narrow concept of the Party that Lenin had developed for the illegal, underground activity necessitated by Tsarist repression. She did anticipate some of the bureaucratization that followed. But, again, she thought that none in the world had dared as the Bolsheviks and that therefore they remained the beacon for the world revolutionary movement to follow. This is exactly what she tried to concretize for Germany upon her release from prison.

\* \* \* \* \*

It took the outbreak of revolution in Germany to free Luxemburg from her prison cell. Beginning in January, 1918, a series of strikes occurred throughout Germany -- strikes having significant political intent. From these strikes there emerged a new workers' organization, The Revolutionary Shop Stewards Movement. Based in the factories of Berlin, it had overtones of the Russian Soviets or workers' councils. The Shop Stewards Movement was to play an important role in the coming revolution. As yet, however, actual revolution seemed far away to the Spartakus revolutionaries. Their organization, although active in propagandizing the Russian events, remained hampered both by size and by the fact that most of its leaders were in jail.

In September, 1918, the German Western Front collapsed. New waves of strikes greeted the news; by October, the German government was on the verge of falling. In an attempt to placate the widespread discontent, the German government declared an amnesty for some political prisoners. Karl

Liebknecht was among the first released. Two weeks later, actual revolution broke out with the revolt of the sailors at the Kiel naval base. On November 9, a general strike took place in Berlin. The German empire was at an end.

The revolution reached Breslow and the prison where Luxemburg was being held. She was released to a cheering throng and, although weakened by her prison ordeal, gave her first political speech in two years on the spot. She returned to Berlin to find that the German Social Democratic Party, along with Kautsky's USPD, had already taken over the government, and the SPD was preparing to act to prevent the extension and deepening of the revolution. As far as the German SPD was concerned, the revolution had gone far enough -- they were in power.

Luxemburg immediately began addressing street rallies and writing sharp polemics against the attempts of the German Party leadership, Schiedmann and Ebert, to "restore law and order". Just as the French Communist Party worked to strangle the near revolution in May, 1968, so the German Party worked to abort the 1918 revolution. The difference, of course, was that the German Party controlled the government and had virtually unlimited access to the forces of repression.

Despite the efforts of the SPD to stop the German movement at mere parliamentary substitution, the revolution continued to swell in November and December of 1918. In the revolutionary confusion, in which many different groups -- the SPD, the USPD, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, and, of course, the bourgeoisie, were fighting for control, Spartakus, with Luxemburg as superb propagandist, struggled to push the movement forward. Their uncompromising slogan, based on the Russian experience, was "All power to the workers' and soldiers' Councils." Unfortunately, the lack of an adequate organization to disseminate their ideas again acted as a brake

-21-

to their effectiveness. By November, 1918, Spartakus had given up the attempt to influence the USPD and Revolutionary Shop Stewards leadership; coming out against everything that was less than revolutionary, they now relied totally on mass activity to bring their program into being.

THE SPLIT WITH SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND THE FEAR OF  
'ISOLATION'

Throughout this period, the bourgeoisie, aided and abetted by the German Social Democracy, launched a vicious attack on the Spartakus group, suggesting that Liebknecht was a murderer, and reviving the old epithet of "Bloody Rosa". Their fear of Spartakus, however, was a direct measure of just how explosive the situation was. As Luxemburg put it in the draft program for the group:

In hate and slander against Spartakus all the counter-revolutionary, anti-social, dubious, dark and dangerous elements combine. This alone shows clearly that the real heart of the revolution beats with Spartakus, that the future is with it. Spartakus is not a party which wishes to obtain power over the working classes or by "using" the working classes. Spartakus is no more than the self-conscious part of the proletariat, which points out to the broad masses their historic tasks at every stage, which represents at every stage of the revolution the final goal and acts in the interest of proletarian world revolution in all national questions. Spartakus refuses to share the government with the servants of the middle classes, with Scheidmann-Ebert, because it considers such cooperation treason to the very foundations of Socialism, a source of strength to the counter-revolution, and the crippling of revolution itself. (13)

13. Nettl, op. cit., P. 469

-22-

Strange as it may seem, this draft program was written for the founding congress of the Spartakus Party. It was not until December 30, 1918, that Spartakus formally withdrew from the USPD to form the German Communist Party (KPD). Even at this late date, Luxemburg was reluctant to form a separate organization. Again she feared separation from a mass party. She only accepted the split when the majority of the Spartakus group demanded it. Jogiches, however, voted against leaving the USPD.

\* \* \* \* \*

The early days of January, 1919, witnessed the escalation of mass activity. Street demonstrations grew ever more massive. The Left groups who were in opposition to the SPD began to consider seriously the question of seizing the government. In the unity council formed between Spartakus, the USPD, and the Shop Stewards, a number of delegates, including Liebknecht, voted for an immediate uprising to take power. The majority of the Spartakus leadership, including Luxemburg, opposed this move as premature. But when the German workers took to the streets in the attempt to seize power, Spartakus saw that, no matter what its reservations, their place was with the workers.

But Spartakus was correct, the uprising was premature. When this was realized by those who had initially planned the insurrection, they attempted to begin negotiations with the Schiedmann government to recover the situation. To this, Spartakus was unalterably and vehemently opposed:

When one is in the middle of the sharpest struggle against the government of Ebert-Schiedmann, one does not at the same time start "negotiations" with the government.... Such negotiations can only lead to one of two results; either to a compromise or -- far more probably -- to a dragging out of the situation which will be used by Ebert's men for the most

brutal measures of repression... The lesson of the last three days calls loudly to the leaders of the workers: do not talk, do not discuss endlessly, do not negotiate, act. (14)

Luxemburg believed that, under no circumstances, should one negotiate "over the heads" of the masses. It was better to suffer total defeat than to attempt to save the situation by unprincipled compromise. Principled defeat would preserve the highest moment of the revolution until it would once more be resumed. Compromise could only confuse, demoralize, and rob the masses of the necessary revolutionary clarity for the next attempt.

#### MURDER -- AND A LEGACY

The tense events of late December and early January increased the pressure on the Spartakus leaders. Rumors abounded that Luxemburg and Liebknecht had been murdered (an attempt was made on Liebknecht's life in December).<sup>14</sup> Right-wing organizations placed a price on Luxemburg's head. But, ignoring her own safety, Luxemburg continued her agitational work. When, in late December, word came that assassins were looking for her and Liebknecht, she did agree to leave her apartment and sleep elsewhere. Eventually they were both forced to change their quarters nightly. By January 14, 1919, the counter-revolution reigned in Germany. They placed the blame for the insurrection on Spartakus -- and primarily on Luxemburg and Liebknecht.

On January 15, 1919, troops arrested the two revolutionaries. Liebknecht was hit in the head with a rifle butt and shot. Luxemburg was smashed with a rifle and shot in the head. Her body was thrown from the bridge of the Landwehr Canal.

---

14. Nettl, op. cit., P. 480.

The world revolutionary movement had lost two of its most courageous fighters, and one of its greatest, most original minds.

The martyrdom of Rosa Luxemburg appears, at first sight, to have made her greater than she was. The exact opposite is true. The martyrdom has so focused on her heroism and courage, given her a certain saintliness in the revolutionary movement, that it has, at one and the same time, belittled her contributions and made it very difficult to critically consider her serious errors.

This is certainly opposed to her whole spirit as a revolutionary, as an unbending critic of all existing thought. For one who challenged no less than Marx himself, and on one of his main theories (accumulation of capital), she certainly would have thought it beneath Marxism for anyone to do less to the works of Luxemburg. If there is one thing that is most uniquely "Luxemburgian" it is critical and uncompromising revolutionary thought. For the Women's Liberation Movement to grasp that rudder is the greatest monument to her, and it is likewise the greatest contribution that can be made to women's liberation, that it shall not stand still, but go forward as a powerful force for freedom:

The Russian Revolution has but confirmed the basic lesson of every great revolution, the law of its being, which decrees: either the revolution must advance at a rapid, stormy and resolute tempo, break down all barriers with an iron hand and place its goals ever farther ahead, or it is quite soon thrown backward behind its feeble point of departure and suppressed by counter-revolution. To stand still, to mark time on one spot, to be contented with the first goal it happens to reach is never possible in revolution. And he who tries to apply the homemade wisdom derived from parliamentary battles between frogs and mice to the field of revolutionary tactics only shows thereby that the very psychology and laws of existence of revolution are alien to him and that all historical experience is to him a book sealed with seven seals. (15)

###

15. Rosa Luxemburg, The Russian Revolution, Workers Age Publishers, New York, 1940.