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Rosa Luxemburg: Political Man, Private Woman

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UC Santa Barbara
Senior Honors Thesis
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Abstract

Rosa Luxemburg had several contrasting sides to her personality that were revealed in her writings, both private and political, and her behavior in political versus private relationships. In this study, I have chosen to characterize her differing personalities in terms of gender as her private, feminine side and her public, masculine side. Although this thesis is more of an exploration of Luxemburg's personality than a concrete set of questions and answers, the central theme of my paper can be summed up in the following question: Rosa Luxemburg was a woman and was a revolutionary, but was she revolutionary as a woman? It is my contention that, while Rosa Luxemburg pushed boundaries with her actions in the political realm, she played the traditional role of a woman in her private life.

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Introduction

In 1920 a small volume of letters was published that changed the way the world viewed Rosa Luxemburg. These letters, never meant to be made public by their author, provide a striking contrast to Luxemburg's political writings, which were filled with the violent language of the longed-for revolution. The letters revealed her humanism, her desire to be 'good,' her love of nature. And they provided one more contrast. There was nothing feminine about Luxemburg's politics. Her published books and articles could have easily been written by a man; her position was not one that a woman typically held. Rosa Luxemburg's letters revealed that the private woman bore little resemblance to the public, political figure. In her letters she was a woman of her time. Only knowing the profession of the woman who wrote them revealed otherwise.

Rosa Luxemburg has captured much attention since her death. Many people have been admirers, many have been detractors, and some have struggled to portray her as objectively as possible. In some ways, Rosa Luxemburg was an extraordinary woman, pushing the boundaries of acceptable behavior with her role in the world of international socialism. However, as was often the case with socialists, there was a sharp division between Luxemburg's private and public lives. Both her politics and her political writings were typical of Luxemburg's male colleagues. There is no question that Luxemburg was revolutionary in her politics. But was Rosa Luxemburg revolutionary as a woman?

Historians have generally not dealt with this issue in more than a peripheral way, perhaps taking Luxemburg's lead by concentrating on her political theories. "Rosa never wanted either to claim women's privileges or to accept any of their disabilities,"[1] wrote her biographer, J.P. Nettl. But this statement only holds true for Luxemburg's political career. Historians have often pointed out Luxemburg's rejection of the women's movement. That rejection was unusual, in that the few women who did choose to enter the world of politics in Imperial Germany tended to work in the women's movement, including Luxemburg's friend Klara Zetkin, who was the leader of the socialist feminist movement. In the political world, Luxemburg acted no different than a man. But

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[1] J.P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 59.

examination of her personal relations shows a different side. This paper will attempt to grapple with this disparity, contrasting Luxemburg's pushing of boundaries in public life to her traditional female role in private.

It was not an easy task Luxemburg faced, that of gaining admission to the inner circles of men's politics in Imperial Germany. Women at this time "faced a difficult challenge. They had to prove their worth, their brain size, their capabilities, talents, and contributions to the national community.... Finally, antifeminists in Germany could point to the indisputable—men and women were different—and draw the disputable conclusion that 'sex lay deeper than culture.'"[2] Perhaps Rosa Luxemburg faced less of a challenge than did women socialists who were specifically tied to the women's movement. Unlike these women, Luxemburg was not trying to gain equality for the rest of womanhood; she only demanded it for herself. "The leaders [of the women's movement] were faced with problems of priorities never confronted by male socialists or even by female socialists such as Rosa Luxemburg or Julie Bebel who stood outside the socialist feminist movement."[3]

Especially revealing of this disparity is her correspondence with Leo Jogiches, the man with whom she was emotionally involved for most of her life. He supported her financially for years, even after they had fallen out because of his infidelity. On almost every issue, political and personal, she deferred to him, or at least pretended to. It seems likely that Luxemburg was trying to soothe his ego, for he was extremely jealous of her success in German social democracy. He never gained nearly so much fame as she. On one occasion she wrote to him, "My success and the public recognition I am getting are likely to poison our relationship because of your pride and suspicion. The further I go, the worse it will get."[4] The disparity between her public and private lives is revealed when she writes, "It's too painful to think that I invaded your pure, proud, lonely life with my female whims, my unevenness, my helplessness."[5] Can one imagine her saying these words, even in jest, to August Bebel or Karl Kautsky? These were, of course, words

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[2] Jean H. Quataert *Reluctant Feminists In Social Democracy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 23.

[3] Ibid., 55.

[4] Elzbieta Ettinger, *Comrade and Lover* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1979), 27.

[5] Ibid., 24.

written in a private letter to a man who was her lover. But that she could seriously write something so strikingly 'feminine' is revealing. Contrast this to an incident repeated by Hannah Arendt. "In 1907, she and her friend Klara Zetkin had gone for a walk, lost count of time, and arrived late for an appointment with August Bebel, who had feared they were lost. Rosa then proposed their epitaph: 'Here lie the last two men of German Social Democracy.'"[6] Not only is this a sharp contrast to Luxemburg's private statements, but it also reveals something of the way she viewed gender. While she challenged traditional gender roles with her political actions, she reinforced them in her private life.

This author will be acting under the presumption that public and political roles and can be considered traditionally masculine attributes, while matters of the home and the private world can be seen as traditionally feminine, as they were viewed as such at the time Rosa Luxemburg lived. Such a view is obviously simplistic and is open to criticism and qualification. But the fact remains that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and even to some extent today, there was a sharp separation of spheres of influence for men and women. To be in the public eye, working, supporting the family—these were seen as pursuits of men, while maintaining a home and raising a family were considered the duties of women. Of course, there are many types of people who fall outside of these two spheres—homosexuals or women who chose to become nurses or teachers and work outside the home, perhaps even choosing to not marry, for example. This study will admittedly ignore these categories, and instead focus on the ideal of gender roles that was constructed at the turn of the century.

Mary-Alice Waters writes, "Rosa Luxemburg's letters from prison reveal a side of her personality that finds little overt expression in most of her writings. It is not a contradictory side of her, as some have tried to prove, not an inexplicable antithesis to the 'public' Rosa, the great woman revolutionary who seemed to her opponents to be so sharp and full of caustic venom. On the contrary, it is an integral part of her personality that influenced her every action."[7] Surely Luxemburg's deep love of humanity and life is what brought her to the socialist movement in the first place. Luxemburg simply

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[6] Hannah Arendt, "A Heroine of Revolution", *New York Review of Books*, vol. 7, Oct. 6, 1966, 22.

[7] Mary-Alice Waters, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 332.

expressed her humanism in very different ways, depending on her audience. For Sonia Liebknecht, she wrote touching letters. For international socialism, she wrote highly intellectual political tracts. Each side of her complemented the other, and she kept these two worlds very separate. This was necessary for a woman in a man's world who wanted to be taken seriously. It is probable that love of humanity is what brought Luxemburg to the socialist movement. But once in the movement, she did not reveal her tender humanism. Her sour relations with many of her colleagues hid any of her traditional femininity.

However, Waters would have difficulty denying that the face Rosa Luxemburg showed to the world and that she reserved for her intimates were vastly different. Luxemburg the humanist and Luxemburg the hater are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile. Luxemburg's letters show us that she was a sensitive humanist, but her reputation and the opinions of colleagues reveal that she never cared to show her humanism to the world. As will be shown, Luxemburg was an often unreasonable woman, and it is important to remember that her nice side does not cancel out her mean side.

Her humanism, and the political theories that it motivated, have been what people have admired most about Luxemburg. It is all too easy, however, for admirers to see only her good points, ignoring the imperfections of her political theory and the unsavory aspects of her personality. It was not only because the SPD was dominated by intolerant and sexist males that she was unpopular while alive. It is all too easy for admirers to forget that Rosa Luxemburg was an "unusually intolerant person, who judged friend and foe alike by very rigid standards, and she was rarely inclined to tolerate weaknesses in or show generosity toward others. Even her closest allies and friends frequently found her exceptionally difficult to get along with."[8]

Rosa Luxemburg was born in Poland to an acculturated Jewish family. She moved to the west in fear of arrest for revolutionary activities and to pursue higher education. She earned her doctorate and decided to go to work for the largest and most successful socialist party in the world, the *Sozialdemocratische Partei Deutschlands*, the Social

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[8] Gary P. Steenson, *Not One Man! Not One Penny!* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), 214.

Democratic Party of Germany. (SPD). As she had been an outsider in Poland because she was a Jew, she was now four times an outsider, as an Easterner, as a Jew, as a woman and, since she had suffered a disease of the hip as a child, as a cripple. It is certainly admirable that she overcame her outsider status and gained such prominence in the SPD. Unlike her colleague, Karl Liebknecht, whose father Wilhelm had been a founder of the SPD, her success did not come naturally. She gained it by the sheer force of her mind and will.

But Rosa Luxemburg's skills as a theoretician should not be overstated. Historians of the SPD have done well to place her in her context. As pointed out, she has often been admired uncritically, and despite its greatness as a work of history, J.P. Nettl's biography does little to dispel this. Nettl does strive for objectivity, but he clearly had a deep admiration for his subject, an admiration that is revealed whenever he calls her 'Rosa.' He has been accused of falling in love with his subject. A more balanced view has come from historians of the SPD. "Despite these truly impressive qualities, [intellectual brilliance], Luxemburg cannot now be judged an influential figure in terms of shaping policy or molding the character of German social democracy or world socialism."[9] It is generally agreed that she had a brilliant mind and was an extraordinary and remarkable woman. But her acerbic personality and her often misguided and dogmatically presented theories force historians to modulate the praise they might give her. In pursuit of moderation of the 'Luxemburg legacy,' this study will necessarily deal in great part with Luxemburg's 'masculine' role—as a socialist theoretician, perhaps to the exclusion of studying her more feminine side.

In her review of Nettl's biography, Hannah Arendt notes the historiographical change that accompanied the publication of Rosa Luxemburg's letters. "These, entirely personal and of a simple, touchingly humane, and often poetic beauty, were enough to destroy the false image of blood-thirsty 'Red Rosa,' at least in all but the most obstinately anti-Semitic and reactionary circles."[10] The warmth and humanism of her letters is inspirational and has a tendency to skew the common conception of her. Of course such deep humanism is admirable, but the rest of her life must not be ignored. It is one-sided

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[9] Ibid., 214.

[10] Hannah Arendt, "A Heroine of Revolution," *New York Review of Books* (vol. 7, Oct. 6, 1966), 22.

and incorrect to say that Rosa Luxemburg was an entirely admirable character who only wanted peace and happiness for all of society. Her reputation in the SPD and her often violent rhetoric belie this statement. But it is also inaccurate and cruel to posit that her whole life was one of violence and that there was some justice in her dying by the violence she preached. Luxemburg's violent rhetoric which invited the claim that she got what she deserved will need to be explored. Was her rhetoric typically violent? Or have her critics distorted the importance of a few phrases?

Another point that needs to be stressed is Luxemburg's unrealistic, almost fanatical devotion to the idea of proletarian revolution. This devotion ruled Luxemburg's life and was the cause of her rejection of the women's movement. She fought only for the revolution; questions of immediate relief for social injustices would only detract from that goal. This was a point on which Luxemburg can be considered a failure. It is perhaps fitting that she died during the German revolution, because that revolution was what she had pinned all of her hopes and dreams upon, and it is unlikely that her life would have had much meaning after its failure. Achieving an understanding of Luxemburg requires that this point not be forgotten.

Undying devotion to revolution was the centerpiece of Luxemburg's intellectual error. Devotion to the cause did not ensure that Luxemburg developed viable theories. In this study, it will be necessary to explore her intellectual errors. Just because Rosa Luxemburg was posthumously revealed as a tender and sensitive woman does not mean that the mistakes in her theories should be ignored. Indeed, historians do well to sift through the mythology surrounding the woman to get to her real ideas and remind their readers that Luxemburg was not highly respected as a theoretician during her life. Luxemburg was committed to the idea of mass action. Her democratic sensibility is what has earned her the respect of many socialists since her death. However, Eric Weitz makes clear that Luxemburg's theories were incomplete, misguided and therefore, potentially dangerous. "By failing to provide insight into the realities of postrevolutionary social conflicts and workable democratic safeguards in a council system, Luxemburg, no less than Lenin, opened the way for the arbitrary exercise of power as the means of resolving conflicts—despite her own strong and undeniable democratic sensibilities."[11] Her

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[11] Weitz, "Rosa Luxemburg Belongs to Us!" *Central European History* (vol. 27, no. 1, winter 1994), 37.

intellectual errors must not be forgotten. Many feminist, communist and socialist groups have claimed Luxemburg's legacy without critically examining her theories.

Historian Eric Weitz notes that "Luxemburg has had resonance far beyond academic circles and the traditional parties of the left. She has served as the inspiration for a number of artistic efforts and has been claimed by new social movements and especially by feminists.... By and large, the reception in these circles has been as uncritical as that among academics and those who identify with the social democratic and communist movements."[12] Rosa Luxemburg, so committed to the revolution, refused to work for the eradication of discrimination such as anti-Semitism or for women's rights. She felt that these were only symptoms of capitalism that would disappear once the revolution took place. To modern eyes, and to those of some of her contemporaries, this was one of Luxemburg's greatest weaknesses. She could not ever countenance cooperation with non-socialist parties, even if it would mean an improvement in the lives of the workers.

This study will concentrate on the years 1914-1919, years of war and revolution. Luxemburg spent most of these years in prison. While there, she wrote two of her greatest works, *The Russian Revolution* and *The Crisis of German Social Democracy*, better known as the *Juniusbrochüre* because of her pseudonym Junius. During these years she also wrote many of the letters that became so well known. These were the years when theory became real. A nationalistic war, against which Luxemburg had warned for many years, broke out. The Bolshevik Revolution, appearing to be the greatest success of revolutionary socialism up to that point, took place. Finally, Luxemburg and Liebknecht tried to lead the masses to revolution after Germany's humiliating defeat in World War I. For this role they were brutally murdered by the paramilitary *Freikorps*. Later they were accused by the Nazis of trying to ruin Germany, and after that they were held up as icons in Communist East Germany. Because of conservative derision and communist iconography, this study will also explore various representations of Luxemburg after her death.

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[12] Ibid., 30n.

Idealism and Respect—The World of belle époque *socialism*

Neither Rosa Luxemburg nor any of the pre-war socialist leaders can be understood outside of the context of the atmosphere of the Second International (1889-1914). The years spanning the end of the nineteenth century to 1914, those of the *belle époque*, can be considered the golden age of socialism. The theories of Marx and Engels were still relatively young, and were studied and elaborated on with excitement. Socialists in this time, before any socialist revolution had succeeded, were optimistic, with faith in the potential of the proletariat. Modern views of socialism, especially in America, have been skewed by the Cold War and the horrors of Russian communism. The Second International occupied a world that was destroyed by the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution.

The Second International was founded in 1889 in Paris. The name 'Second International' was used because members of the group saw themselves as inheritors of the legacy of Marx's International Workingmen's Association (1864-1876), after 1889 called the First International.[13] As its name implies, the Second International's noble cause and distinctive feature was its internationalism. The group embraced an ideal of the working masses throughout Europe living in a society ruled by the proletariat. Unfortunately, the internationalism of the working class movement in Europe was shown to be a myth in 1914, at the outbreak of World War I.

> Two generations of Europeans had grown up in the optimistic belief that man had progressed far enough to secure ascendancy over nature and to change and perfect his social environment through argument, conciliation, and the majority vote. They had also been inclined to view war as a relic of a barbarous past, to which mankind would surely not revert.... Nowhere were these illusions more deeply seated than in the Labour movement, especially in the Second International.[14]

It was this devotion to optimistic illusions that killed the Second International so ruthlessly, and no one was more pained by its dissolution than the most faithful, Rosa Luxemburg included.

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[13] Gary P. Steenson, *Not One Man! Not One Penny!*, 221.

[14] Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed, Trotsky: 1879-1921* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954) 211

An oft-repeated anecdote suggests the unity of international socialism in this period. At a congress of the International held in Amsterdam in 1903, right wing French socialist Jean Juarès made a speech defending his party and ridiculing, among other things, Rosa Luxemburg's misguided passion. When he finished no one was able to translate for him, so Luxemburg herself jumped up and "reproduced his moving oratory: from French into equally telling German. It was the kind of gesture—*vouloir* and *pouvoir* combined—that the Second International loved."[15] It is also a sign of the separation of personal and political in the International. Despite the fact that Jaurès and Luxemburg were on opposite ends of the socialist spectrum, he always held her in high esteem and she "never managed to dislike" him, as Nettl revealingly writes.[16]

The world of socialism was not, of course, one of peace and harmony. Socialists were famous for their polemical wrangling. How Luxemburg was viewed and treated in this world is a point of some debate. Contemporaries, writing after her death, emphasize the great esteem in which she was held. But historians today often point out how often she was attacked, both personally and politically. Luxemburg spoke little of these attacks, which were, in public at least, usually made only by socialists who were not highly esteemed. She responded with dignity in the official party papers to attacks on her theories but she would not deign to reply to personal attacks. Luxemburg, the woman, the outsider, was especially a target. Her ideas and her person were attacked continuously, despite her devotion to the cause. However, the mores of the International dictated that she was treated with respect, at least in public.

From its founding congress, the SPD dominated the Second International. This was, at first, due not to numbers, for the French far outnumbered them at the founding congress held in Paris, but rather because of the high level of organization the SPD had already achieved, although the SPD was still illegal in 1889. The SPD in Imperial Germany has been called a state within a state. For years under Bismarck's anti-socialist laws (1878-90), which kept the SPD out of politics, socialists had built up their own society, complete with meetings, holidays, congresses, newspapers and even athletic

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[15] Nettl, 195

[16] Ibid.

clubs.[17] When the anti-socialist laws were not renewed in 1890, the SPD already had a large following and was highly centralized, ready to burst onto the political scene, although official discrimination kept real power out of their hands until after World War I. Rosa Luxemburg chose to work for the SPD because of its central role in international socialism.

But Luxemburg never felt at home in Germany, and she was never fully welcome in the SPD. Her ideas were far too radical, she was too much of a foreigner, and she was a woman who did not want to work in the woman's movement. Rosa Luxemburg was a creature of the International; she could not long survive after its demise. An outsider in all nations, she only felt at home in an international world. But even there, because of her irascibility, she was never fully welcome. The International was the closest thing Luxemburg had to home. That world, built on political and humanitarian optimism, could not survive the realities of nationalist passions and warmongering. 1914 saw the Second International die an ignominious death. The Communist International that came after took only its name, not its spirit.

Rosa Luxemburg's Early Years

It was from the world of the International that Rosa spoke when, in February 1914, she made a speech in which she was alleged to have said, "If they think we are going to lift the weapons of murder against our French brethren, then we shall shout: 'We will not do it.'"[18] This phrase was the basis of the public prosecutor charging her with calling for public disobedience of the laws. On trial, Rosa Luxemburg spoke on her own behalf.

> The prosecution paid much attention to my small person. In its indictment I have been described as a great danger to the safety of the state. The prosecution could not even resist sinking to the level of gossip and characterized me as 'red Rosa.' They went as far as to call in question my personal honor by suggesting that I would take flight if the court found me guilty.... The prosecutor said...'it would be incomprehensible if the accused did not take to flight.' In other words if I, the prosecutor, had to sit a year in prison, then I would take to flight. Sir, I believe you, *you* would run away; a Social Democrat does not. He stands by his deeds and laughs at your judgements. And now sentence me.[19]

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[17] Albert S. Lindemann, *A History of European Socialism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 137.

[18] Nettl, 481.

[19] Nettl, 492.

No traditional femininity characterized this speech. Impressed witnesses to the trial might have spoken afterwards of her 'manly resolve.' Few in the audience could have guessed that less than a month earlier, this same woman had characterized herself to a friend as a 'weak woman.'[20] Rosa Luxemburg certainly was not a 'weak woman,' as this speech shows. She was willing to stand up to the Imperial prosecutor, accusing him of sinking to the level of gossip and of being so weak as to run away if he were threatened with jail. But she would do no such thing. For the cause, she would go to hell and back. To a socialist colleague she wrote, "I assure you that I would not flee even were the gallows threatening, for the simple reason that I consider it thoroughly necessary to accustom our party to the fact that sacrifice is part of the socialist's craft and that this should be obvious."[21] Another interesting point to note is her use of the male pronoun in describing a social democrat. Until the emergence of the radical feminist movement in the late twentieth century, of course, it was most common to use 'he' as a general pronoun. Still, the fact that Luxemburg was a woman on trial, supposedly representing social democracy, highlights her word choice. It is one more indication that Luxemburg had no desire to challenge gender roles.

The speech quoted above was given in February 1914, only six months before the outbreak of World War I. She had been arrested for committing treason by encouraging the masses to disobey the laws of Germany. Specifically, Luxemburg encouraged socialist workers if they were ordered to war to disobey, to refuse to shoot their proletarian brothers, and instead to raise their arms in revolution instead. Luxemburg and others could see the rising tide of militarism and nationalism in Europe, and foresaw that it would only lead to war. But Luxemburg also had faith in the masses and in her party. Although she had been in opposition to the party leadership since 1910 due to the SPD's growing reformism, she hoped that if the SPD and the laborers it claimed to represent were faced with war, they would join hands with their socialist brethren across Europe in

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[20] Luise Kautsky, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg: Letters to Karl and Luise Kautsky from 1896-1918* (New York: Robert McBride and Co., 1925), 165-6.

[21] Written to Walter Stöcker, in Stephen Eric Bronner, ed., *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1978), 153.

defiance of their leaders. Such a sentiment was an outgrowth of the ideals of the International that Luxemburg so fervently embraced.

Luxemburg had joined the SPD in 1898 after moving to the west from Poland. Polish was the primary culture and language of her parent's household, although German was also spoken and read frequently. Once the youngest daughter, Rosa, started school, she was forced to speak Russian. This area of Poland had been under the tsar's rule since 1815, when the partitions of Poland were finalized. By the time she moved to the west, Luxemburg was fluent in Polish, German and Russian, and she eventually mastered French as well. Luxemburg's intelligence is demonstrated by the fact that she was admitted to the second girls' High School in Warsaw, where her family had moved when she was three. Spaces in the top schools were reserved for Russians. Only the best Polish students were allowed at the second tier of schools, and Jews had an even harder time gaining admittance. There was a quota on how many Jews could attend each school, a restriction set up by Tsar Alexander III in a wave of reaction that accompanied the assassination of his father, Alexander II. Rosa Luxemburg not only was admitted to this school but also became the top student in her class.

How Luxemburg became involved in the socialist movement originally is unknown. By the time she graduated, however, she was deeply involved in revolutionary circles. Although she earned the gold medal for academic achievement, she was not allowed to claim her prize "on account of her rebellious attitude towards the authorities."[22] The revolutionary movement in Russia was concentrated in high schools and universities. "Unlike the basic classes of society, the intelligentsia were articulate; they had the training indispensable for an analysis of the evils that plagued the nation; and they formulated the programs that were supposed to remedy those evils."[23] Not that the intelligentsia had an easy time. There was a small but notorious subversive group in Russia during the relatively liberal reign of Alexander II (1855-1881), called *Narodnaya Volya* (the People's Will). Its members' favored tactic was terrorism. By murdering highly placed officials, they felt they could show the people that the autocracy was not unassailable. Their greatest success came in 1881, with the murder of Alexander II. This

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[22] Paul Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Work* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1940), 18

[23] Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 3.

act also marked the effective end of *Narodnaya Volya*. Its members had been decimated by tsarist officials on account of earlier murders, and in 1883 the last member was turned into the police.[24]

The murdered tsar's son decided to crack down on subversion. These were years of conservative reaction in the Russian Empire, and revolutionaries were few in number. It was nearly impossible for those with subversive attitudes to find each other because of the great danger of revealing such an attitude. However, in 1887, after several months of clandestine preparation, a small group of students made an attempt on the life of Alexander III. Included in their ranks was Alexander Ilyich Ulyanov, Vladimir Lenin's older brother. The plot was an utter failure, but it marked the beginning of a rebirth of revolutionary movements in Russia.[25]

It was during these dark days that Rosa Luxemburg joined one of the remaining cells of the Polish proto-socialist group *Proletariat*. About her attraction to this group, early biographer Paul Frölich conjectures,

> The way from rebellious opposition at school to revolutionary Socialism was predestined for Rosa. She felt the yoke of Russian Absolutism threefold: as a subject of the Russian State, as a member of a subject people, and as a member of the outcast Jewish race. Throughout her life she showed great readiness to take up the cause of the suffering and the oppressed, and she doubly felt every blow that fell on others.[26]

It was not uncommon for women as well as men to join these groups, although women were in the minority. One historian has quoted the percentage of women in revolutionary circles in Russia in the 1870's at 15%.[27] Feminism was rarely a priority, perhaps because overall conditions in Russia were so oppressive. Reform in the treatment of special groups, women or Jews, for instance, was not a high priority because liberal reform of any kind was near to impossible. It was in this atmosphere that Rosa Luxemburg became a revolutionary, and it is here that she gained her uncompromising

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[24] Bertram D. Wolfe, *Three Who Made a Revolution* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1948), 58-9.

[25] Ibid., 61.

[26] Frölich, 21.

[27] Barbara Alpern Engel, "From Separatism to Socialism: Women in the Russian Revolutionary Movement of the 1870's" in *Socialist Women*, Marilyn Boxer and Jean H. Quataert, editors (New York: Elsevier, 1978), 53.

attachment to revolution. Many Russian revolutionary émigrés came to Europe with this seemingly irrational commitment. Rosa Luxemburg stands out because, unlike Lenin or Plekhanov, she did not primarily work for the Russian party, although she played a large role in Polish socialism until her death. In Germany, where liberal reforms were possible, and did take place, this attachment was an anomaly. Only in a limited sense was there an oppressive system in Germany to overthrow. But in an atmosphere of repression, as existed in the Russian Empire, complete revolution seemed to be the only solution.

When Rosa Luxemburg was nineteen, she felt the ever-present threat of arrest. For this reason, and to pursue her education further, she moved to Zürich, home of a large population of exiled citizens of the Russian Empire. "The young emigrants worked resolutely at their chosen studies, but they thought less of their bread and butter in the future than of the future of humanity. In their colony men and women were equal."[28] The decision to move west was probably not a difficult one for Luxemburg to make. In Poland she had never fit in. Her family was Jewish, so she was rejected by many Roman Catholic Poles. But they were also assimilated, so they were rejected by many in the large Jewish community of Poland. On top of this, Rosa Luxemburg had suffered a disease of the hip as a child that left her with a limp for the rest of her life. Luxemburg was always intelligent, quick witted, some would say tactless and loud-mouthed, even, and she fit in with few groups.[29] This is a point that needs to be stressed. If Luxemburg had been a diplomat, a conciliator, kind and gentle, her outsider status probably would not have been so dramatic. But her difficult personality rarely ingratiated her to anyone. As a girl in Poland, she probably was not expected to do more with her life than marry, have children and set up a successful household, as her mother had done. Rosa Luxemburg would never have been satisfied with that life. In Poland, as well, she could not have attended the university, as girls were not permitted. It was surely exciting for her to move to relatively liberal and cosmopolitan Zürich, where she was surrounded by other educated revolutionaries.

In the SPD, Luxemburg was noted for her defiance, her individuality and her single-minded pursuit of goals. Knowing her background, that she grew up as a member of a

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[28] Frölich, 22-3.

[29] For a captivating, though conjectural account, see Elzbieta Ettinger, *Rosa Luxemburg* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986)

minority group within a subjected people, and was a woman and cripple on top of that, one is not surprised that her already fiery character burned so strongly, though she probably would have been a difficult and controversial character no matter what she did with her life. Irascibility seems to have been an ingrained part of her character.

A Socialist Romance: Luxemburg and Jogiches, 1890-1907

The international socialist movement and the SPD were committed to securing equal rights for women. But as twentieth century American feminists have discovered, equal rights under the law and breaking down traditional gender roles are two very separate things. The socialist subculture contained many famous romances. Socialist couples were often united by common ideals and theories. Sexual attraction and typical romantic love, although naturally in existence, seemed to have taken a back seat to the common goal of socialist revolution. Perhaps the most famous of these couples was Lenin and Krupskaya, whose unflagging devotion to each other, personally and politically, lasted until the end of their lives. Examination of famous socialist romances reveals the contradictions between the theories of equality that socialists preached and the patriarchy that they often practiced. Although politics was the overarching theme holding this world together, the political ideals of women's liberation and actual personal relations did not always mesh. The men who spoke out so vehemently for women's rights often had unequal relationships with their lovers.

When Luxemburg arrived in Zürich, one man particularly stood out to her. Leo Jogiches had moved to Switzerland from Vilna, Lithuania. There he had organized workers for the General Jewish Labor Bund, the largest and most successful socialist group in Russia until the founding of the all-Russian party. After being arrested twice, and under threat of another arrest, Jogiches illegally crossed the border and moved to Zürich, to join the many other exiled eastern revolutionaries. He was never well known in the international socialist movement, but played a central role in Polish socialism, especially after the revolution of 1905, and was a founding member of the *Spartakusbund*. Two months after Luxemburg's death, he was murdered by the police for his role in the failed German revolution.

What attracted Luxemburg and Jogiches to each other cannot, of course, be known. She was not traditionally pretty, and may never have had a lover before. She was short, walked with a limp, had a prominent nose and broad flat cheeks. Jogiches, on the other hand, was tall and handsome with deep, brooding eyes, and was attached to a woman already when he met Luxemburg.[30] He was probably attracted to her exceptional intelligence and strength; she to his seriousness and commitment to revolution. There are few clues to any of this in her letters. Indeed, she often wrote to him complaining of his lack of affection and refusal to make their relationship public by marrying her, or at least living in the same city. Whatever their initial attraction, Luxemburg and Jogiches were to spend much of the rest of their lives together, both personally and politically in a relationship that now seems to have been a battle of egos as much as traditionally loving.

Leo Jogiches's influence on Rosa Luxemburg was great, though not easily or measured. She claimed in her letters to him that his ideas were the inspiration behind many of her articles. She had to be his voice in that realm, because "his brilliance and intelligence notwithstanding, Leo is simply unable to write."[31] His work in Vilna had consisted of being among the laboring class, actively organizing. There he became convinced of his superior intellect and ability. The highly theoretical and literary world of Zürich was not for him. He was never appreciated in that environment, and he surely knew it. He tried to gain recognition in the Russian movement by joining Georgii Plekhanov in Geneva, who was at the time the leading theoretician of Russian Marxism. However, Plekhanov and Jogiches clashed immediately, virtually destroying Jogiches's chance of gaining influence.[32]

The loss of status that accompanied Jogiches's move west was surely crushing to his sizable ego, and his disappointment played out in his relationship with Luxemburg. She had other lovers after their breakup, but none were intellectual companions as Jogiches had been. The rest were admirers, deeply attached and faithful, but she most likely never felt them to be her equals. Revealingly, she never used the familiar *du* in letters to any of the men in her life except Jogiches. The rest she addressed with the formal *Sie*. J.P. Nettl

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[30] Ettinger, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 43.

[31] Ettinger, *Comrade and Lover*, xx.

[32] Ettinger, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 45.

calls the relationship "one of the great and tragic love stories of socialism."[33] Elzbieta Ettinger writes, "They belonged together, not because they willed it but because they could not unwill it. Their happy times together were bliss. Their battles were bloody. They parted, loving each other, defeated."[34] Less romantically, Paul Frölich writes, "The friendship of Leo Jogiches...was to prove of the greatest importance for her intellectually, politically, personally."[35] It seems likely that these statements are overly romanticized. Surely in some way Luxemburg and Jogiches were deeply in love, but their relationship was so strange that it is difficult to describe it as a typical love story. It could perhaps be more suitably termed a volatile mingling and clash of egos.

The letters Rosa Luxemburg wrote to Leo Jogiches (those she received have not survived) paint a complex picture. While she was struggling to make a place for herself in the foreign world of German social democracy, she wrote to him, "I'm just an ordinary kitten who likes to caress and to be caressed, who purrs when happy and meows when unhappy—the only way she can express herself. Since you forbid me to meow all I can do is write about myself and my boring affairs."[36] This from the woman who was about to engage in a lengthy and cerebral written battle with Eduard Bernstein over the central tenets of socialism.

Almost every letter contains at least a few words about money. Jogiches supported Luxemburg with his considerable inheritance until her death. Even after they parted he sent her money in the name of the Social Democratic Party of the Kingdoms of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL), which they had co-founded. Luxemburg was apparently never astute with finances. Many letters contain apologies for spending too much on a dress or pastries for a friend. ("I don't eat any."[37]) And these apologies were usually coupled with demure words to soothe his temper and ego. One gets the sense of a daughter writing off to her rich father for funds.

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[33] Nettl, 384.

[34] Ettinger, *Comrade*, xiii.

[35] Frölich, 25.

[36] Ettinger, *Comrade*...,34.

[37] Ibid., 12.

In addition to money, Rosa Luxemburg demanded that he send along his deepest emotions. "Your letters contain *nothing, but nothing* except for *The Workers' Cause,*[38] criticism of what I have done, and instruction about what I should do.... I want you to write me about your personal life. But not a single word!"[39] Luxemburg always accepted his criticism and advice about her work; she sent him manuscripts of all her books and pamphlets. But she also wanted more; she wanted his soul, as any lover would. Luxemburg rejected the setbacks of a woman in politics, but this does not mean that she was not a woman in her private affairs. She would not bow to Bernstein on issues of scientific socialism, and she made a name for herself in the SPD by defending the goal of revolution. But things were not so clear cut with the man she called her husband. At one point, trying to assert her independence, she wrote to him, "If I'm independent enough to perform single-handed [sic] on the political scene, that independence must extend to buying a jacket."[40] Such an uncharacteristic display of self-sufficiency might have been a result of the publication of the first of her attacks on Bernstein, which appeared in the press just a few days earlier.[41] In general she deferred to Jogiches, tried to make him feel good about himself, and downplayed her own accomplishments. Later, to another friend she wrote, "As before, he doesn't himself write a single line but he is none the less the very soul of our party publications."[42] She attributed most of her ideas to him.

The delineation between public and private was conscious for Luxemburg. On December 5, 1899, she wrote to Jogiches, apparently about a personal attack that had been made on her. "You'd better get used to it *once and forever* ... nothing can make me respond *now or ever* ... to such dirt....; it would be degrading and I refuse to respond, even if it's only my whim. And please, my love, don't ever advise me to write volumes in self-defense. One may do it in three words or, best, not at all."[43] Luxemburg knew that she was an easy target, on different occasions being called a "cantankerous woman," an

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[38] Sprawa Robotnicza, the theoretical organ of SDKPiL

[39] Ettinger, 8.

[40] Ibid., 62

[41] Mary-Alice Waters, ed. *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 35.

[42] Nettl, 384.

[43] Ettinger, *Comrade and Lover*, 110.

"uprooted Jewess," and was also attacked for her "petticoat politics."[44] If she had wanted to, she could have become mired in these personal polemics through her entire career. But this would have been unusual for a socialist. "Socialists prided themselves in keeping private preferences separate from public or party stances."[45] So, although she felt a deep hatred for many in the SPD (a feeling that was surely reciprocated), she rarely broke with party discipline by berating her opponents in public. She was on the extreme left of the socialist party; the parliamentary wing was generally on the right. The same motives that kept her in support of reformist parliamentary socialists helped to keep her out of the world of personal attack as well. Luxemburg was confident of her own intelligence, and she knew that the main hindrance to success in Germany was her status as an outsider. Defending such insulting and underhanded attacks would only call attention to the points of her life that she wished to downplay. She was not going to succeed as a Jew or a woman but as a socialist theoretician.

Before the war, Luxemburg discovered that Jogiches had been unfaithful, and so they parted company. Her pride would not allow her to remain with someone who had shattered her trust so completely, though he clearly had no wish to end the relationship. They remained in contact for political reasons and, after intercepting a letter from another of her lovers, Jogiches sometimes followed her around Europe, threatening to kill her.[46] Not surprisingly, her letters after that were cold and impersonal. No longer did she call him Dyodyo, the loving diminutive. She avoided addressing him in the first person whenever possible. "I must again ask to discuss business with me in writing and to leave me in peace in my own home,"[47] she wrote to him when he refused to relinquish the key to the apartment they had shared. Relations remained icy until the war, when his enduring affection for her came through in his actions. Luxemburg had never been in excellent health, and being in prison took its toll on her. Jogiches made sure that she was taken care of while incarcerated, even having rice brought in for her sensitive stomach. Many years after they parted company, Luxemburg wrote to Luise Kautsky, "Leo is neither Kaiser

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Albert S. Lindemann, *Esau's Tears* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 179.

[46] Nettl, 382.

[47] Ettinger, 171

nor wiser, [a reference to a poem by Goethe] not does he know 'how one loves.'"[48] She was clearly bitter over the heartache he had caused until the end of her life, but he seems to have retained a devotion to her until the end. During the German revolution, he immersed himself in German affairs, heading the Spartacists after her death, dying for their cause as well.

What conclusions can be drawn from the relationship between Leo Jogiches and Rosa Luxemburg? Evident in Luxemburg's letters to Jogiches is a deep affection and sentimentality. Few of her political colleagues or opponents ever saw, or even guessed at, this side of her. The difference between her public and private lives was sometimes enormous, but such a discrepancy in matters of the heart is not uncommon. Her sensitivity to his ego and emotional and financial dependence on him motivated her to constantly placate him with words of affection and admiration. But her comparably sized ego forced her to leave him when he betrayed her trust. It is her role in this relationship more than any other that reveals Luxemburg's acceptance of gender ideals in her private life. Although Luxemburg and Jogiches lived apart for most of their relationship, it was at his insistence. She continually expressed the desire to live a 'normal' life with him—with their relationship made public, living together, perhaps even married and with children. Certainly her willingness to live alone was unusual, though not revolutionary, but she did not seem to live this way by choice.

World War I

> We are now facing the irrevocable fact of war. We are threatened by the horrors of invasion. The decision, today, is not for or against war; for us there can be but one question: by what means is this war to be conducted? Most, aye everything, is at stake for our people and its future, if Russian despotism, stained with the blood of its own people, should be the victor. This danger must be averted, the civilization and the independence of our people must be safeguarded. Therefore we will carry out what we have always promised: in the hour of danger we will not desert our fatherland. In this we feel that we stand in harmony with the International, which has always recognized the right of every people to its national independence, as we stand in agreement with the International in

[48] Luise Kautsky, *Rosa Luxemburg: Letters 1898-1918*, 191.

> emphatically denouncing every war of conquest. Actuated by these motives, we vote in favor of the war credits demanded by the Government.[49]

It was with these words that the SPD presented its support of World War I. Rosa Luxemburg saw these words as one more piece of the war hysteria that was running rampant over Europe. "War is methodical, organized, gigantic murder. But in normal human beings this systematic murder is possible only when a state of intoxication has been previously created."[50] This statement was Luxemburg's response to the declaration of war. After seeing the horrors and massive destruction of two world wars, two nuclear bombs, and the Nazi holocaust, the modern mind tends to side with Luxemburg's view on war.

The First World War was devastating for every citizen of Europe. It was greeted by optimistic young men, parading in droves to the recruiting stations with wives and girlfriends on their arms. But the new soldiers were finally disillusioned by months of fighting in the squalid conditions of the trenches. The beginning of the war was met with bitter disappointment by the socialist left. Those who had thrived in the world of the Second International, deeply believing in its principles of international solidarity and cooperation were stung most harshly. The SPD had been growing steadily and gaining more influence for years; how had such a tragedy come to pass?

The origin of World War I is a topic about which historians have written tomes. There is no simple answer to the question, "what caused World War I," but a brief examination of the motives of parliamentary socialists in Germany who supported the war is necessary if one wishes to know how justified Luxemburg was in her anger. In retrospect, it is clear that the war was doomed to be a catastrophe, causing little more than death, suffering and eventually another world war. But the socialists in the *Reichstag* who voted in favor of the Kaiser's war credits did not know this. Several of Rosa Luxemburg's many biographers have demonized, or at least shown little sympathy for her opponents and glorified her minority stance. For example, Elzbieta Ettinger refers to

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[49] Waters, 270.

[50] Ibid., 271.

Karl Kautsky's "pro-war stand,"[51] despite the fact that he was opposed to the war. Surely the fact that she took such an unpopular stand is noble, but ignoring the motives of the other side would be to employ judgement in hindsight, an act which historians must always try to avoid. The main object of demonization has often been Karl Kautsky, who was the focus of much of Luxemburg's polemical writing. But, as one of Kautsky's biographers has written, "Despite the claims of ideologues, Kautsky's interpretation of Marxism was not incorrect, it was just on the losing side."[52] Even if one could say that Rosa Luxemburg was right, the question still remains, why was she in such a tiny minority? What were the motives of those in her party who supported the war?

Before war was seen as imminent, the International's stance was basically to prevent any war from happening. If prevention was not effective, socialists in every country were to call for a general strike to subvert their countries' mobilization. The Stuttgart resolution, as the plan was officially called, was passed in 1907 and renewed in 1912. However, it is clear that this resolution did not represent the convictions of most of the members of the International.[53] It had been accepted mainly to appease the radical left, led by Luxemburg and Lenin. Before the war clouds began to accumulate, most party leaders followed the tenets of the Stuttgart resolution by sponsoring anti-war speeches. Rosa Luxemburg was an especially popular speaker for anti-war tours, and her conviction in 1914, discussed above, came about during one of these.

When war was declared, it seemed that Rosa Luxemburg and a few others were the only ones who truly believed in the Stuttgart resolution. Great national enthusiasm broke out in the masses of the working population and within the SPD. Kautsky reasoned that since the SPD could not influence the government in the politics that led to war, that it would not be able to stop the war. Although he remained suspicious of the government's motives, after the fateful vote in favor of war credits on August 4, 1914, the question shifted from war or peace to victory or defeat. Kautsky did not welcome the war; he saw it as a great tragedy. But he was fatalistic.[54] Many parliamentary delegates expressed the

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[51] Ettinger, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 194.

[52] Gary P. Steenson, *Karl Kautsky 1854-1938*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978) 181.

[53] Lindemann, *History of European Socialism*, 186.

[54] Ibid., 182.

sentiment that they had the choice between voting yes on the war credits or being hung by their constituents.

The idea of a general strike troubled social democrats, especially those of Germany, because they saw that it could only lead to Germany's defeat. They particularly feared being taken over by despotic and backward Russia. For even if all of international socialism were to call a general strike, Russia, with its relatively small socialist faction, would not be much affected. Germany, on the other hand, which had a much larger and better organized socialist movement, would be crippled if its workers chose to go on strike.

Voting for war credits was, for the SPD, a largely symbolic gesture. Its section in the *Reichstag* was not large enough to oppose a majority. Kautsky at first assumed that the SPD would vote against the war credits, but the right wing of the party made it known that they would vote for the war credits whatever the rest of the party decided. Such a move was highly unusual in this disciplined party. The majority of the parliamentary delegation soon let it be known that they would also vote in favor of the war credits, and the rest of the members fell into line and decided to present a unanimous SPD vote, as was customary. Kautsky felt that theoretical clarity was necessary to uphold the integrity of the SPD, and wanted to avoid any breaches within the party.[55] Many in the SPD were centrists, as Kautsky was. They did not whole-heartedly support the war; theoretically they were opposed to it altogether. But neither were they willing to breach party discipline or cause a split in the SPD. The idea of a defeated and invaded Germany was likewise not appealing to them. If other countries were going to mobilize, then Germany must engage in self-defense.

Centrism such as this angered Rosa Luxemburg. She tended to place the world into two categories. One was either for or against her. As is easily imaginable, this tendency alienated many people. One gets the impression that she had more respect for the Kaiser and the tsar than for Karl Kautsky and Philip Scheideman—socialists who supported a war of self-defense. Luxemburg's world was black and white. This attitude is the key to her intolerance, and the reason so many hated her so much.

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[55] Steenson, *Karl Kautsky*, 182.

Luxemburg's anger toward these centrists, with Karl Kautsky as figurehead, probably did not stem from their surprising her with their support of the war. More likely, their support was the last straw in her growing lack of respect for the majority of the SPD. World War I and the SPD's support of it in some ways fulfilled her worst nightmares about the direction international socialism had been taking since she entered the movement. She must have seen the emphasis in the SPD shifting away from revolution and towards parliamentary reform. If she believed that her theoretical victory over Eduard Bernstein's revisionism in the 1890's put that phenomenon to death, she would have been highly delusional.

As mentioned above, Luxemburg did seem at times to be delusional in her attachment to revolution. The reason the SPD was becoming more a party of reform with every passing year was because reformism seemed to be working. The conditions of the working masses were improving, and few of them seemed to desire a revolution, a complete undoing of the system they knew. This is a theme that will be returned to in a discussion of the German Revolution.

Although socialists of other countries, especially in France, derided the SPD for forsaking its ideals, when the time came to vote for war credits in their country, they likewise supported their governments. The French socialist party (the SFIO) claimed to be fighting a war of self-defense against German militarism. They could not accept that Germany, who had declared war in fear of Russian mobilization, was doing the same.

Support for the war waned as it became clear that there would be no swift victory for either side. But still, those who dissented and attended an anti-war conference in Zimmerwald in 1915 were often expelled by their party leaders. Rosa Luxemburg surely would have taken an active role in that movement had she not spent the war in prison. But her cell did not silence her. From jail she wrote articles and pamphlets and, most importantly, "The Crisis in the German Social Democracy."

Typically Masculine, Typically Feminine—Luxemburg's Letters and Political Works

"The Crisis in the German Social Democracy" is a scathing critique of the SPD's decision to support Germany's entrance into World War I. Luxemburg was shocked and saddened after August 4, 1914, when the SPD approved the emperor's war credits. She

came close to committing suicide.[56] But she did not let her agony and disappointment stop her political work. She almost immediately went to work assembling a group of like-minded people. Luxemburg drafted a general letter, informing the International that opposition to the war within the SPD did exist. Such a statement was important because the SPD had been the bulwark of the Second International. Every other party had looked up to its members for the half century preceding the war as the keepers of the legacy of Marx and Engels. Only three other people would allow their names to be at the bottom of Luxemburg's letter of dissent: Klara Zetkin, Franz Mehring and Karl Liebknecht.[57]

Such dissent anywhere in Europe was rare at this time. At the onset of the war, member parties of the Socialist International voted almost exclusively in favor of their warring governments, except for two Serbs and the Bolshevik caucus in the Russian *Duma*.[58] It was not until a second vote in December that Karl Liebknecht broke with party discipline to vote against the war credits in the *Reichstag*. Due to the war, the International, naturally, fell apart. In the Junius pamphlet, Luxemburg quoted a German socialist newspaper: "The International ceases to be an effective instrument in times of war. It is, on the whole, a peace instrument."[59]

In February 1915, Rosa Luxemburg was seized by the police and taken to prison. She had been charged a year earlier for an anti-war speech but had put in an appeal, which, though rejected, postponed her arrest. She also was able to remain free several additional months due to poor health.[60] While in prison for this term (she was released and imprisoned again later in the war), she wrote "The Crisis in the German Social Democracy", or *Juniusbrochüre*. This pamphlet, smuggled out of jail and published in April 1916, is one of her finest works. In it, she criticizes the SPD for its hypocritical support of a war that they had foreseen and condemned just a week earlier in the party press. She criticizes adherence to the *Burgfrieden* (civil peace), which essentially forced the SPD to abandon class conflict. And she criticizes the entire imperialist system that brought on the war. All of this is done with often violent rhetoric. "The soldiers of

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[56] Nettl, 609.

[57] Ibid., 610.

[58] Ibid., 613.

[59] Mary-Alice Waters, *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, 295.

socialism, the workers of England, of France, of Germany, of Italy, of Belgium are murdering each other at the bidding of capitalism, are thrusting cold, murderous irons into each other's breasts, are tottering over their graves, grappling in each other's death-bringing arms."[61]

Of all her works, the Junius Pamphlet is perhaps the most difficult to critique because it does not introduce any new theory. In it, Luxemburg was more concerned with a critique of imperialism, the policy of the SPD and the tragedy of the war. "The *Juniusbrochüre* is a curious mixture of scholarship and passion, unusual for Rosa Luxemburg in that it is almost entirely *negative*. Where she used to slash the surrounding jungle to make room for the construction of her own ideas we now get—nothing; only an epitaph sufficient unto itself."[62]

Lenin wrote an interesting critique of the Junius pamphlet shortly after it was published, which probably sheds more light on Lenin and his views than on Luxemburg's work. "Written in a very lively style, Junius's pamphlet has undoubtedly played and will continue to play an important role in the struggle against the ex-Social Democratic Party of Germany, which has deserted to the bourgeoisie and the Junkers."[63] Lenin found only two major errors with the work. The first is "its silence regarding the connection between social-chauvinism [social-patriotism] and opportunism." Opportunism is a topic that Lenin expounded on in great length. This section of the critique reveals that Lenin was perhaps far more concerned with building a strong party by expunging opportunists than dealing with the pressing issues of the real world. It is a criticism that only a die-hard revolutionary could make. Luxemburg did not approach this issue because she was concerned with the horrors of a world war and the loss of life it would entail.

The greatest fault in the Junius pamphlet was its overstatement. Luxemburg contends that "national wars are no longer possible."[64] Such a statement reveals the limitations of "The Crisis of Social Democracy." It is specifically tied to the time, place and circumstances in which it was written. Whether this statement means that Luxemburg did

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[60] Waters, 259

[61] Ibid., 328.

[62] Nettl, 631.

[63] Waters, 428.

not believe that wars for independence in Asia and Africa could take place is irrelevant in this context. Rosa Luxemburg tended towards overstatement; this is just one of her excessive claims. Other than this critique, and a few statements of standard questionable socialist theory ("Scientific socialism has taught us to recognize the objective laws of historical development"[65]), there is little else incontestably wrong with the *Juniusbrochüre*.

In a more general sense, Luxemburg's works are open to much more criticism. "Rosa Luxemburg's major errors were centered around three questions: the right of nations to self-determination; the nature of the party and its relationship to the revolutionary masses; and certain Bolshevik policies following the October Revolution."[66] As noted, there was little gray in Luxemburg's worldview; things were either black or white, good or bad. She gave up the power of numbers and establishment because she did not believe that Polish self-determination was a worthy cause; it was merely a distraction. For her, there was no need to subvert imperialism in one place if other countries were still subjected to capitalist tyranny. The extremity of her theories on the issue of self-determination is what made them dubious.

Her views on the relations between a working government or party and revolutionary masses would have been even more dangerous, had anyone tried to put them into practice. She was wary of the idea of post-revolutionary government. Her theories rarely mention what was to happen after a revolution took place. What happened in the street was to be the main motive for action; government was only supposed to reflect and consolidate street action. She did call for workers and soldiers councils with representatives elected for one year, subject to recall at any time. The instability of a government based on such councils is easy to imagine. More problematic is that she called for the disenfranchisement of large and not clearly defined sections of the population. Only the proletariat—workers and soldiers—were to have the right to vote.[67] This is a rather questionable policy for one portrayed as embodying a democratic

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[64] Ibid., 329.

[65] Waters, 269.

[66] Ibid., 12.

[67] Weitz, "Rosa Luxemburg Belongs to Us!", 36.

sensibility. "By failing to provide insight into the realities of post-revolutionary social conflicts and workable democratic safeguards in a council system, Luxemburg, no less than Lenin, opened the way for the arbitrary exercise of power as the means of resolving conflicts."[68] If Luxemburg saw socialist revolution as a realistic proposition, she clearly did not make provision for a realistic post-revolutionary government.

Obsession with revolution and street action is clearly in evidence in Rosa Luxemburg's speech on the founding of the Spartacus League. "To educate the proletarian masses socialistically meant to deliver lectures to them, to circulate leaflets and pamphlets among them. But it is not by such means that the proletarians will be schooled. The workers, today, will learn in the school of action. (*Hear! Hear)*"[69]

Who were these "socialistic masses" whom Luxemburg addresses? It seems at times that the noble proletariat that she often spoke of was simply a figment of her imagination. One always gets the sense from Luxemburg's writings that the proletarian class is somehow morally superior to the bourgeoisie. When one realizes that her own life was anything but proletariat, and that she rarely interacted with the working class, one realizes how delusional Luxemburg at times could be. It bears mentioning that she always maintained a bourgeois sensibility: she never really experienced poverty; she always had a maid. It could easily be argued that Luxemburg was simply a hypocrite. But that would be an entirely different paper.

Her unrealistic and off-putting extremism was further revealed in an article she wrote during the German revolution. "And what has changed for the masses of workers in their daily wages, in their living conditions? Nothing at all or as good as nothing at all!"[70] The fact that universal suffrage had been instituted and that the workers had been granted many of their demands, including the eight-hour day and higher wages, was immaterial for Luxemburg because a total revolution had not occurred.[71] It also did not seem to matter to Luxemburg that the vast majority of workers were content with what they had gotten; most did not long for violent revolution that would disrupt their lives.

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[68] Ibid., 37.

[69] Rosa Luxemburg, *On The Spartacus League*, translated by Eden and Cedar Paul (A Young Socialist Publication, November 1966), 21.

[70] Ibid., 38.

[71] Eric Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890-1990* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 84.

Peace was most likely a higher priority for most war weary proletarians in 1919 than the establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat. It is just this kind of intellectual error that causes socialist historians to devote so little space to Luxemburg in their general histories.

Critics have made much of Luxemburg's violent rhetoric, but are they making something of nothing? Certainly Luxemburg did employ violent language, but it is only one small part of her writings. Combing through the *Juniusbrochüre*, which is in translation some seventy pages, one finds roughly eight to ten violent phrases or sentences. They are the most striking and memorable sections of the work, and so probably are worth more than their length. To posit, as several German socialist newspapers did upon her death (quoted in the *New York Times*) that there was "some sort of justice" in her violent death, for she "fell victim to the basest passions which she herself had awakened," is cruel, but worth investigation.[72] Anybody who reads one of Luxemburg's letters to her friends will especially feel that this is a mistaken judgement. But at the time of her death, only a few individuals knew of Luxemburg's love of life and nature and the joy and peace she felt whenever spring came. The working masses that heard her speak or read her articles during the violent days of war and revolution would be more apt to identify with the brutal rhetoric that she employed than the self-proclaimed bird-lover of her letters.

If one wishes to examine the assertion that Luxemburg died by the violence she awakened, it would perhaps be best to look at her speeches which were, after all, her most direct connection to the working class. At the close of her speech on the founding of the Spartacus League on December 30, 1918, Luxemburg said,

> What is now incumbent upon us is that we should deliberately concentrate all the forces of the proletariat for an attack upon the very foundations of capitalist society. There, at the root, where the individual employer confronts his wage slaves; at the root where all the executive organs of ownership rule confront the object of this rule, confront the masses; there, step by step, we must seize the means of power from the rulers, must take them into our own hands. Working by such methods, it may seem that the process will be a rather more tedious one than we had imagined in our first enthusiasm. It is well, I think, that we should be perfectly clear as to all the difficulties and complications in the way of revolution. For I hope that, as in my own case, so in yours also, the augmenting tasks we

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[72] *New York Times*, January 18, 1919.

> have to undertake will neither abate zeal nor paralyze energy. Far from it, the greater the task, the more fervently will you gather up your forces. Nor must we forget that the revolution is able to do its work with extraordinary speed.[73]

Today, this does not seem like an especially violent or frightening speech. But the use of the words 'seize,' 'confront,' and 'attack,' and the urge to "fervently gather up forces," lends an urgency to the speech that would have been inspiring for disgruntled workers and upsetting to employers who heard the speech in 1918. Luxemburg, with rhetoric, is urging the workers to take the means of production into their own hands. Even if the workers did this in a peaceful manner, it is likely that their employers would respond with violence. The ruling classes, including those that owned factories, were most likely frightened of socialists and their encouragement of workers to perceived violence. Especially during a volatile time, as when this speech was given, and with the image of communist Russia fresh in their minds, employers would be on edge, expecting the worst from the working class. "Every strike, every Social Democratic Party congress, every demonstration, was evidence of the omnipresence of the 'red threat' endangering the wealth of the bourgeoisie and the stability of the social order."[74] The downward spiral of fear and mistrust could only lead to violence if any action was taken.

Even if Rosa Luxemburg rarely used overtly violent rhetoric, the masses associated extreme actions and violence with her person, due to her extreme theories and devotion to revolution. If the masses, during a time of unrest like that of November and December 1918, were in a violent and near to frenzied state, it is unlikely that Luxemburg did anything to calm them. Indeed, she almost certainly egged on their excitement. Moreover, it is likely that the most violent workers were drawn to her. So while it is unjust to say that Luxemburg died by her own violence, it must be conceded that Luxemburg did help to promote the violent atmosphere in which she was murdered.

The personality that Luxemburg showed to the working masses and that she reserved for her friends were vastly different. Fortunately for those seeking a balanced view, most of Luxemburg's letters have been published. It is a sign of her friends' devotion that they

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[73] Rosa Luxemburg, *On The Spartacus Programme*, trans. by Cedar and Eden Paul (A Young Socialist Publication, 1966), 22.

[74] Ute Frevert, *Women in German History: From Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation*, (New York: Berg Publishers, 1988) 107.

did publish the letters. Luise Kautsky was the first to do so, and this section will focus on Luxemburg's letters to her, written while imprisoned during the war. While she was penning such violent sentences as those above, she wrote to Mrs. Kautsky, "I suppose all inclination for music has left you. Your mind is preoccupied with worries about the wrong course history is taking, and your heart is full of sighs.... And everyone who writes me, moans and sighs similarly. To me, nothing seems more ludicrous than that. Don't you understand that the general misery is all together *too great* to bemoan it?"[75] Clearly Luxemburg wanted to keep her political and her personal lives separate. She would toil away on a seventy-page pamphlet criticizing the war, but beyond that she needed to live her life and live it joyfully. This dichotomy goes to the heart of this study. Western society, especially in the nineteenth century, saw political, public work as masculine and the private world as feminine. That Luxemburg was able to play such a prominent political role is testimony to the fact that gender roles were continuing to evolve, as they had been for the previous two hundred years. She was not above this separatism, though.

A direct comparison between her political writings and her letters is perhaps the best way to confront the dichotomy of Rosa Luxemburg. She was a radical socialist preacher of violent revolution, but she was also a woman who loved botany, the natural world and letters from her dear friends. More striking than this dichotomy, however, is the realization that Luxemburg was sharp-tongued, truculent and often hated by many of her socialist colleagues. The acerbic personality, so notorious in the SPD, does not often come through in her letters, and reconciling the two aspects of her personality is problematic. Perhaps it is best said that they cannot be reconciled. The hateful Rosa Luxemburg does not cancel out the sensitive Rosa Luxemburg. The best that historians can do is to honestly present both sides of her personality and admit that she was a mysterious and contradictory character.

The quote above hints at another theme that runs through Luxemburg's letters. The world was not all politics for her. Despite the war, "*everything* is still left that otherwise gave me joy: music and painting and cloud and botanical excursions in springtime and good books and Mimi [her cat] and you and many other things besides—in short, I am

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[75] Luise Kautsky, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg: Letters, 1896-1918*, 190.

immensely rich and intend to remain so until the end. This complete yielding to the miseries of the day is something that I can't understand and bear at all."[76] A clear contrast to this statement is presented in the Junius pamphlet. In that work, her anger and deep emotions about the war ring through her intellectual discussion.

Luxemburg's sensitivity to her friends' needs is especially revealed in her correspondence with Sonja Liebknecht. Karl Liebknecht, Sonja's husband, was Luxemburg's closest political ally during the war. Together, they founded the Spartacus League, they both spent much of the war in jail, and they were both shot on the same day during the German Revolution. Karl had been sentenced to hard labor during the war, and Luxemburg went to great pains to comfort his wife. These letters more than any others are filled with Luxemburg's love of nature—botany and birds particularly. Although probably emphasized for the sake of the recipient, the letters are also full of joy that one would be hard-pressed to imagine a prisoner feeling. "I lie here alone and in silence, enveloped in the manifold black wrappings of darkness, tedium, unfreedom, and winter—and yet my heart beats with an immeasurable and incomprehensible joy, just as if I were moving in the brilliant sunshine across a flowery mead."[77] Here Luxemburg is playing the age-old role of a woman comforting her friend, a sharp contrast to the controversial revolutionary.

From prison Rosa Luxemburg wrote to a friend, Hans Diefenbach, that she "laughed herself silly" upon receipt of a letter from him. "You know that I feel and suffer with every creature; I will rinse off a wasp that slips into my inkwell three times in lukewarm water and then dry it in the sun on the balcony in order to give back to it that little bit of light."[78] Such a statement would seem to be an almost irreconcilable turn-about from her treatment of political opponents. But she continues, "my sympathy…has definite bounds; they end a hairbreadth before meanness begins. That is to say, my friends must have their accounts in good order and, at that, not only in their public, but also in their private, most private, lives." Luxemburg demanded consistency from her friends; it was a lack of that quality that drove her to hate so bitterly her opponents.

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[76] Ibid., 190.

[77] Rosa Luxemburg, *Letters from Prison to Sonja Liebknecht*, translated by Cedar and Eden Paul, (Berlin: Publishing House of the Young International, 1921) 55.

[78] Bronner, *Letters*, 175.

This intolerance for inconsistency is revealed in a letter to Mathilde Wurm from December 1916. Luxemburg wrote as a response to Wurm's political indecision. "I swear to you: I would rather do time for years on end...than 'struggle' along with your heroes, or, generally speaking, have anything to do with them! Even Count Westarp [leader of the Conservatives in the *Reichstag*] would be better—and not because in the Reichstag he spoke aloud of my 'almond-shaped velvet eyes,' but because he is a *man*!"[79] The 'heroes' she mentioned were her political enemies of the day, those who were in support of the war, including Karl Kautsky, Wilhelm Dittmann and Hugo Haase. Her lengthy letter is a show of the intense rage she was capable of expressing and the above phrase in particular shows what she thought a 'man' was supposed to be—strong and resolute in his convictions. She might as well have condemned Kautsky for showing 'womanly weakness' in his politics.

Rosa Luxemburg accepted traditional gender roles, but this does not mean that she countenanced women's mistreatment by their husbands or lovers. It has already been noted that she would not tolerate the companionship of Leo Jogiches after his infidelity, despite her self-proclaimed deep love for him. She also encouraged her female friends to break from their partners if the men were not treating them with respect. "To thunder great words in public about the 'freedom of the individual'—and in private to enslave a human soul through mad passion—I don't understand it and I don't forgive it."[80] This is another of Luxemburg's black and white statements. As anyone who has ever been involved in a relationship knows, matters in love are never, ever as simple as Luxemburg would have liked to think. It is, of course, unfair to judge another person on matters of the heart. Some might see Luxemburg's decision to leave Jogiches as admirable, others might regard it as unnecessary if she really loved him. Her role in the Kautsky's relationship is quite revealing in this matter.

Karl, who had been Luxemburg's mentor and friend when she first arrived in the SPD, had become one of her many enemies. He was rather arbitrary, insensitive and heavy-handed with his wife, Luise. She and Luxemburg had grown to become great friends, and the latter encouraged Luise to fight for her personal independence and

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[79] Ibid., 173.

[80] Ibid.

emancipate herself from her husband. Luise Kautsky eventually became romantically involved with her husband's brother, Hans, and Karl surely resented Rosa Luxemburg for the role he thought she played in his wife's infidelity.[81] Her influence on Luise Kautsky had much to do with the rift in relations, political and personal, between Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky.

Although her intolerance and acidity rarely show in her letters, her humanism is revealed in her political works. Unlike Lenin, who was able to countenance world war if it were to lead to revolution, Luxemburg never saw war as a good thing. She was too concerned with the human loss involved to view war in any sort of positive light. Luxemburg realized that the mass of the army, and those that died in the highest numbers, were proletarians donning soldiers' uniforms. "Now millions of proletarians are falling on the field of dishonor, of fratricide, of self-destruction, the slave-song on their lips."[82] Luxemburg would take advantage of a revolutionary situation if it presented itself in time of war, as it did in 1918, but she could not hope for defeat for Germany, she could not hope for more lives to be lost, in the name of revolution.

The Junius pamphlet does contain several references to the role of women in war. At one point she condemns the majority of socialist women for collaborating with the capitalist women's movement, for "work[ing] in soup kitchens and on advisory committees instead of carrying on agitation work for the party."[83] Later she notes the role women are forced to play during war, and the stance that the government encourages them to take. "It pleaded with proletarian women that they should spare their husbands at the front the tales of suffering that they and their children were being forced to undergo, to bear in silence the neglect of the government, to cheer the fighting warriors with happy stories of family life and favorable reports of prompt assistance through government agencies."[84] But these are the only two mentions of the plight of women in war, and they are more condemnations of the collaborating socialist party than a defense of women or suggestions as to how they should be better or more equally treated.

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[81] Nettl, 411.

[82] Waters, 270.

[83] Ibid., 293.

[84] Ibid., 294.

If World War I was clearly an event of destruction and disappointment for Rosa Luxemburg, a much more ambiguous event was the Russian Revolution. Her views on this momentous time are less clearly defined, and how historians and socialists have viewed her critique of the revolution is likewise complex. The Junius Pamphlet is, as mentioned, nearly impossible to criticize. Her critique of the Bolshevik Revolution, on the other hand, has been controversial since its first publication.

The Russian Revolution

To no country was the war more devastating than the already troubled Russia. Only a few months into the war, the tsar was sending soldiers to the front with no boots or guns, instructing the army to take what they needed from the dead bodies they found. As outlined earlier, there had been a relatively strong subversive movement in the Russian underground for many decades. In 1905 revolution had broken out in St. Petersburg, resulting in the tsar granting a constitution and calling a constituent assembly, the *duma*. But these were really reforms in name only; little in the structure of Russian society actually changed. The corruption and ineffectiveness of the tsarist autocracy was revealed in the crisis of world war.

It was a mob of common women, desperate for food, who started the revolution. In February 1917, revolution broke out in Russia. In October the Bolsheviks, headed by Vladimir Lenin, took control of the government. Revolution in Russia was, for the always highly theoretical socialists, an interesting conundrum. According to popular socialist theory, a bourgeois revolution had to sweep away the remnants of feudal society and establish bourgeois political supremacy before the proletariat would be able to take over. Russia had for a long time been the last place that socialists expected socialist revolution, because it was seen as still being in the feudal stage of society. When revolution broke out in 1917, many socialists expected bourgeois structures to then be erected. According to this line of thought, a minimum of fifty years would be needed before proletarian revolution would be possible. This picture was further complicated by the fact that both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat were only a small minority in Russia. The vast majority of the population was made up of peasants—minor players in the minds of most Marxists. Facing this problem, Lenin had earlier "proposed that Russia's proletariat ally

itself with her massive, restless peasantry in what he termed a 'revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.'"[85] This alliance would sweep aside feudalism and then step aside to allow the bourgeois to establish themselves in power.

Lenin was surprised by the February revolution. He was in Switzerland when it occurred, and he took a train back to Russia as soon as he could. After the tsar was deposed and soviets were organized, a provisional government was established, which decided to continue the war. The soviets had initially ceded power to the new government, but the plan for a new offensive caused them to lose faith and induced those who had been neutral to embrace a more revolutionary stance. The last leader of the provisional government was Alexander Kerensky, who was a forceful opponent of the Bolshevik Party. He moved to repress the party and arrest its leaders, accusing Lenin of being in the pay of Germany.[86] His repression, however, led to a swing in public opinion to the left.

But while the famous slogan, "All power to the soviets!" gained in popularity, there was no widespread support for a Bolshevik takeover, even on the left. Even members of his own party rejected Lenin's calls for an immediate and violent seizure of power. Trotsky's view that the Bolsheviks should delay their takeover until seeing what happened at the Second Congress of the soviets prevailed. The congress backed a Bolshevik takeover, which occurred on the seventh and eighth of November. The Bolsheviks could not, however, have assumed power without the "wave of popular indignation and resentment in the autumn of 1917."[87]

The actual logistics of the revolution were not as clear cut as they seem on paper, however. Throughout Russia an almost anarchistic scramble by peasants and workers to take over land and factories was occurring. Lenin and the Bolsheviks could do little more than to approve of the decentralization and try to maintain their position. One place where Lenin did have real power was in foreign affairs, and he moved almost immediately to settle a peace treaty. Many opposed this move, calling for a revolutionary war to be fought against Germany. But the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which ceded a large

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[85] Lindemann, *A History of European Socialism*, 198.

[86] Ibid., 201.

[87] Ibid., 203.

part of European Russia to Germany, was signed anyway. The fate of the Bolshevik Revolution was uncertain at best.

In November, 1917, from prison in far away Germany, Rosa Luxemburg wrote to Luise Kautsky, "Are you happy about the Russians? Of course they will not be able to maintain themselves in this witches' sabbath,--not because statistics show that economic development in Russia is too backward, but because the social democracy in the highly developed west consists of pitifully wretched cowards who, looking quietly on, will let the Russians bleed themselves to death."[88] This remark was the centerpiece of Luxemburg's highly controversial view of the Russian Revolution.

Rosa Luxemburg's critique of the Bolshevik Revolution has encountered criticism since its publication. Supporters, such as Klara Zetkin, maintained that she changed her mind regarding the Bolsheviks before she died, but never put her new position onto paper. What were the charges against Luxemburg that made her theories officially unacceptable to the Comintern?

Luxemburg's pamphlet, *The Russian Revolution*, was also written in jail during World War I. The pamphlet and an article written earlier for *Spartakusbriefe*, the official organ of the Spartacus League, were the expressions of her critique. The other members of Spartacus tried to dissuade Luxemburg from writing a critique, because they wished to express solidarity with their Russian counterparts. They did publish her letter, written in either late July or early August 1918, but preceded it with an editorial comment.

The article indicted the Bolsheviks on several counts. But first, Luxemburg proclaimed that the Russian Revolution would not survive if Germany also did not revolt. Next, she wrote that, by making a separate peace with Germany at Brest-Litovsk, the Bolsheviks were capitulating to German imperialism. She also indicted the Bolsheviks for not immediately putting down counter-revolutionary forces in the outposts of Russia, including Finland, Ukraine, and the Baltic. This issue tied into the familiar conundrum of national self-determination. The Bolsheviks had officially propagated the idea that each nationality in the former Russian Empire should be able to choose its own fate. Luxemburg predicted that this would only lead the Bolsheviks later to repress these people. And indeed, counter-revolutionaries did take power in most of the outposts, and

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[88] Kautsky, 207.

they were repressed under Stalin. The most controversial statement that Luxemburg made in this article was that Russian revolutionaries had only two choices. One, to survive, but with "grave blemishes."[89] Secondly, they could not survive, but have a clean record. That Luxemburg drew this conclusion was not as controversial as the fact that she practically went so far as to recommend the latter course. For although Luxemburg, as noted often, was dedicated to revolution, she wanted the revolution to be 'pure.' In practice, this did not mean that the revolution needed to benefit the vast majority of people. It seems unlikely that Luxemburg even knew what the vast majority of people wanted, as her experience in the German revolution showed. A pure revolution for Luxemburg was one that was theoretically correct. Although she presumably wanted what was best for the masses, her strict adherence to doctrine revealed that her good intentions did not translate into effective action. Luxemburg did not operate under the concept of 'false consciousness,' as some socialists did. False consciousness was the idea that what the masses wanted and what was best for them were not necessarily the same. Luxemburg seemed to have believed in full democracy, but she failed to reconcile her desire for universal suffrage with its practical institution.

At the beginning of both the pamphlet and the article, Luxemburg expressed an overall support for the Bolsheviks, but she then proceeded to lay out her critique. Luxemburg's criticism was based on four points. First, she spoke about the Land Policy. Luxemburg did not criticize Lenin and his colleagues for not undertaking a large-scale confiscation of land, which would have been nearly impossible. But she did condemn them for not even setting in motion a realistic land policy. Luxemburg recognized that by putting forth easy slogans such as "Land, Bread and Peace," Lenin was simply trying to win support, not making realizable goals. The second issue was the nationality question, in which she basically reiterated and elaborated upon the points she had made in her article. "It is obvious that the...entire nationalist movement which at present constitutes the greatest danger for international Socialism has experienced an extraordinary strengthening from the...Russian revolution and the Brest negotiations...from all this the terror and strangling of democracy followed directly."[90]

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[89] Nettl, 697.

[90] Ibid., 700.

The only point that Luxemburg later retracted was her critique of Lenin's dispersal of the Constituent Assembly. The Bolsheviks had called an assembly to confirm their power in January 1918. But, much to the dismay of Lenin, the democratically elected Constituent Assembly refused to ratify his decrees on land, peace and the power of the soviets.[91] He dispersed it with the false justification that elections had been held under an obsolete law, made under Kerensky, that gave more weight to the votes of the more wealthy segments of the peasantry. Trotsky justified the action with the argument that institutions "tend to lead a life of their own and, if they did not reflect the particular reality assigned to them, must be destroyed."[92] Clearly, Trotsky's abstract theories had little to do with the reality of the situation.

Luxemburg opposed Trotsky's theory with her own. She believed that the masses breathed life into institutions. "The living fluid of the popular mood continuously flows around the representative bodies, penetrates them, guides them."[93] It is unlikely that Luxemburg thought that the Bolsheviks dispersed the Constituent Assembly and restricted suffrage for the sake of theoretical purity. She recognized that their move was made to maintain power; she perhaps would have done the same if she had been in Lenin's position. Nettl contends that Luxemburg made this critique because she realized that the Bolshevik revolution would be a model for subsequent socialists, especially the Germans. She wrote her critique in order to maintain theoretical purity for the future. "Her general conclusions had little or nothing to do with the details she was criticizing; rather she was applying well-established, systematic conclusions to a new set of facts."[94] Luxemburg was probably not aware of the real conditions in Russia, including how small a minority was in support of the Bolsheviks.

One of Rosa Luxemburg's most famous statements was made in the fourth point of her critique. "Freedom only for supporters of the government, only for the members of one party—however numerous they may be—is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and

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[91] Deutscher, 372.

[92] Nettl, 701.

[93] Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution and Leninism or Marxism?* Translated by Bertram D. Wolfe (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1961), 60.

[94] Nettl, 704.

exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently."[95] It is this section of *The Russian Revolution*, dealing with the problem of dictatorship, that is most often cited in support of Luxemburg's democratic sensibilities. But was this really a clear-cut statement of democracy that her supporters have made it out to be?

Superficially, Luxemburg does seem to be the ultimate purveyor of democracy, especially compared to the dictatorial excesses in the name of socialism committed by Lenin and Stalin. "Decree, dictatorial force of the factory overseer, draconian penalties, rule by terror—all these things are but palliatives. The only way to rebirth is the school of public life itself, the most unlimited, the broadest democracy and public opinion. It is rule by terror which demoralizes."[96] What is missing in Luxemburg's analysis is the bourgeoisie. Granted, in Russia especially they made up only a small percentage of the population, but the working classes were just as numerically insignificant. Luxemburg was certainly an advocate of democracy, but only, it seems, for those who were oppressed under capitalism. As noted in the discussion of the Junius Pamphlet, there is no place for the bourgeoisie in her post-revolutionary worldview. Indeed, the idea of the 'bourgeoisie' is a difficult one to pin down. Luxemburg never made clear what she meant when using the terms bourgeoisie and proletariat. If, by bourgeoisie, she meant one who was not a blue collar worker, who lived a comfortable existence, probably employing a maid, then Luxemburg herself was a member of that hated class. Leaving such terms undefined was a large oversight for one who perceived revolution as a realistic goal. For once a revolution took place, who would decide who fit into which class? Such a situation would clearly leave a society open to the arbitrary execution of power.

An interesting historiographical issue arises around Lenin's reaction to Luxemburg's *Russian Revolution*. In many biographies of Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin is quoted as saying after her death that she was an eagle. This is a good example of skewing someone's meaning by taking their words out of context. When he called her an eagle, he was employing a Russian saying: an eagle can sometimes fly lower than a chicken, but a chicken can never fly as high as an eagle.[97] Yes, Lenin did say that Luxemburg soared as

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[95] Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*, 69.

[96] Ibid., 71.

[97] Nettl, 792.

high as an eagle, but her admirers fail to point out that he also said that she sometimes sunk to the level of a chicken.

It was the Russian Revolution more than any other event that completely changed the face of socialism. Survival of the Bolsheviks in Russia, even more than the war, destroyed the image of socialism and ensured that a world such as that of the Second International would never exist again. But while revolution and war were tearing apart Rosa Luxemburg's world, her letters stayed as cheerful as they had always been. Perhaps it was to distract herself as much as Sonja Liebknecht that Luxemburg wrote the younger woman such long, cheerful letters, relating her experiences with the local bird population and how happy spring made her, despite the fact that she was in prison. As mentioned earlier, Luxemburg was probably so cheerful in her letters to Sonja Liebknecht because her husband, Karl, was also in prison, and Luxemburg did not want Liebknecht to be prostrate with grief.

But it seems unlikely that Luxemburg could have actually maintained such a cheerful demeanor in those extremely troubled times. Her vision of international socialist solidarity had been nearly destroyed by war; millions of Germans, including many of her friends, were dead; she was imprisoned, unable to take part in the now tiny and insignificant international socialist movement; it seemed that humanity had shown the depths to which it could sink. Only if Luxemburg was delusional could she have actually been as deeply happy as she claimed to be.

Although the world seemed to be in shambles, Luxemburg seems to have had hope for the future. In May, 1917, she wrote to Sonja Liebknecht,

> My dear little bird, the whole history of civilisation...is grounded upon 'human beings deciding the fate of their fellows.'; the practice is deeply rooted in material conditions of existence. Nothing but a further evolution, and a painful one, can change such things. At this hour we are living in the very chapter of the transition.[98].

One can here see the same hope that led to such disappointment in 1914. Then Luxemburg had faith in humanity and international socialism that was destroyed by the war. But she continued to hope for a revolution in Germany. Hope was, perhaps, the only

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[98] Luxemburg, *Letters From Prison to Sonja Liebknecht*, 31-2.

thing keeping Luxemburg afloat in prison. The revolution that she longed for so desperately was never to occur.

On January 14, 1918, Rosa Luxemburg wrote to Sonja Liebknecht, "Perhaps next year I shall be able to bring you flowers myself on your birthday, and to go for a walk with you in the Botanical Gardens in the country. How lovely it will be."[99] Luxemburg could not, of course, foresee that almost exactly one year later she would be shot by the paramilitary *Freikorps* while trying to lead a revolution that was not to take place. Her body was unceremoniously dumped in the Landwehr Canal, not to be found for another month.

Conclusion

Many pictures of Rosa Luxemburg can and have been drawn that are seemingly impossible to reconcile. She has been portrayed as a brilliant theoretician, a sensitive humanist, a kind friend, a revolutionary woman, a woman of her time, a woman who pushed boundaries, an acerbic hater, an intellectual blunderer, a violent speaker, and a woman who worked as a man. What was it that tied all of the pieces of Rosa Luxemburg together? Why have so many disparate groups adopted her legacy, either as a negative or a positive role model?

Throughout this study, one theme has continually reemerged, tying the different strains of Luxemburg together. That theme is her often unreasonable extremity. Her uncompromising nature was what allowed her to work so effectively in a foreign man's world without being put off by insults and insecurities. It forced her to leave a man that she supposedly loved as a husband because he made one mistake. Her extreme sense of the injustice of the world led her into the socialist movement where she worked fervently, and it also was the source of her many theoretical errors.

Her extremity has also been the reason that so many different groups have been able to latch onto her legacy. It is easy for feminists, socialists, artists, anti-Semites, anti-communists and Nazis to present only one side of the many sides of Rosa Luxemburg to back up their claims. It has been the aim of this study to show that she was a woman who cannot ever be easily categorized. A balanced picture has been exceedingly difficult to

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[99] Ibid., 59.

paint. At times it seems that all historians can do is to present all the sides of what Trotsky called Luxemburg's "many-sided nature,"[100] and say that she was not a woman who can be easily explained. Her conflicting aspects must often be written off as irreconcilable.

It has often seemed that the many historians who have studied Rosa Luxemburg have applied her black and white worldview to explain her. With a few notable exceptions, they have presented her as an almost wholly admirable character (J.P. Nettl, Mary-Alice Waters, Elzbieta Ettinger) or as a woman who, despite her intellectual brilliance, does not deserve a fraction of the praise she has received since her death (Eric Weitz, Gary Steenson). What these historians have failed to recognize or work into their analysis is that Rosa Luxemburg was an infinitely complex woman. Once it seems that a clear picture of her has been found, a new shading emerges that complicates the entire process once more.

The centerpiece of this study has been gender. From the beginning of what we know about her life, she took advantage of every opportunity she could in a man's world. She went to school and excelled, she participated in revolutionary circles, but she did not press for women's specific needs. She then moved to Zürich on her own, a move which, though not as unusual in socialist circles, was surely highly unusual for nineteen year old girls in Europe at the time. She went to the university and continued to excel. She met and fell in love with another revolutionary, but they rarely even lived in the same city—one is forced to wonder how much this had to do with their large egos. Luxemburg joined the SPD, but refused to be relegated to the women's movement—it was something in which she seemed to be entirely uninterested. Never would she allow herself to be set back or put forward just because of her sex.

But throughout her entire career, Luxemburg lived almost a double life. Most of her letters could have been written by any educated female in Germany in the nineteenth century. Other than her profession, her lifestyle was also not so unusual. She always had a maid, she was at least marginally interested in clothes, and the sympathies expressed in her letters were typically feminine, especially those to Jogiches in which she tried to soothe his ego. An almost ridiculous quality accompanies photographs of her dressed in

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[100] Leon Trotsky, *My Life,* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), 203.

the fashions of her day, once one realizes who she was and what she did. Luxemburg had no overt interest in changing the paradigm of gender in her lifetime.

Although not as well known today in America as she once was, Rosa Luxemburg still continues to play a role in the public mind. As is often the case in political movements, the American Socialist Party accepts Luxemburg as a role model, even selling posters of her likeness, without acknowledging her errors or failures. She has been further romanticized in popular culture by a novel, *Karl and Rosa*, and a movie bearing her name. Simple romanticization of this kind is arguably only a few steps ahead of the demonization of Luxemburg that took place during the Cold War—most interestingly in a book entitled *The Rosa Luxemburg Contràceptives Cooperative.* The only place that her name appears in this work is the title. Apparently the reader is supposed to automatically relate Luxemburg's name to the horrors of communism and realize the author's purpose. Popular culture will never stop simplifying historical characters to facilitate their degradation or admiration, much to the chagrin of historians everywhere.

But historians are not above simplification. It seems that, to this day, Luxemburg has continued to shape her own portrayal. Admiring historians often just take what she gave them. They have often not tried to sort out her complexities, preferring to take her as she presented herself. This is especially true in the case of gender. Too often historians have simply said that she was a strong woman who worked in a man's world, refusing to take the benefits or impediments that went along with being a woman at the time. There is a much deeper and more contradictory story that this study has tried to grapple with in a preliminary way

The death of communism in Russia has in many ways reduced the demand for studying socialist history in America. Communism is no longer a threat that must be understood and defeated. But the end of the Cold War has also meant that historians are now more open to sorting out the complexities of socialism and communism. For the majority of Americans during the Cold War, and even today, ten years later, there was no difference between these two political systems. Unfortunately, also, socialists tend to view the past simply. American socialists are quick to deride Stalin and his horrific reign, but they are often just as quick to accept as venerable any socialist leader that was blacklisted by Stalin. The importance of this study has been to sift through all of the

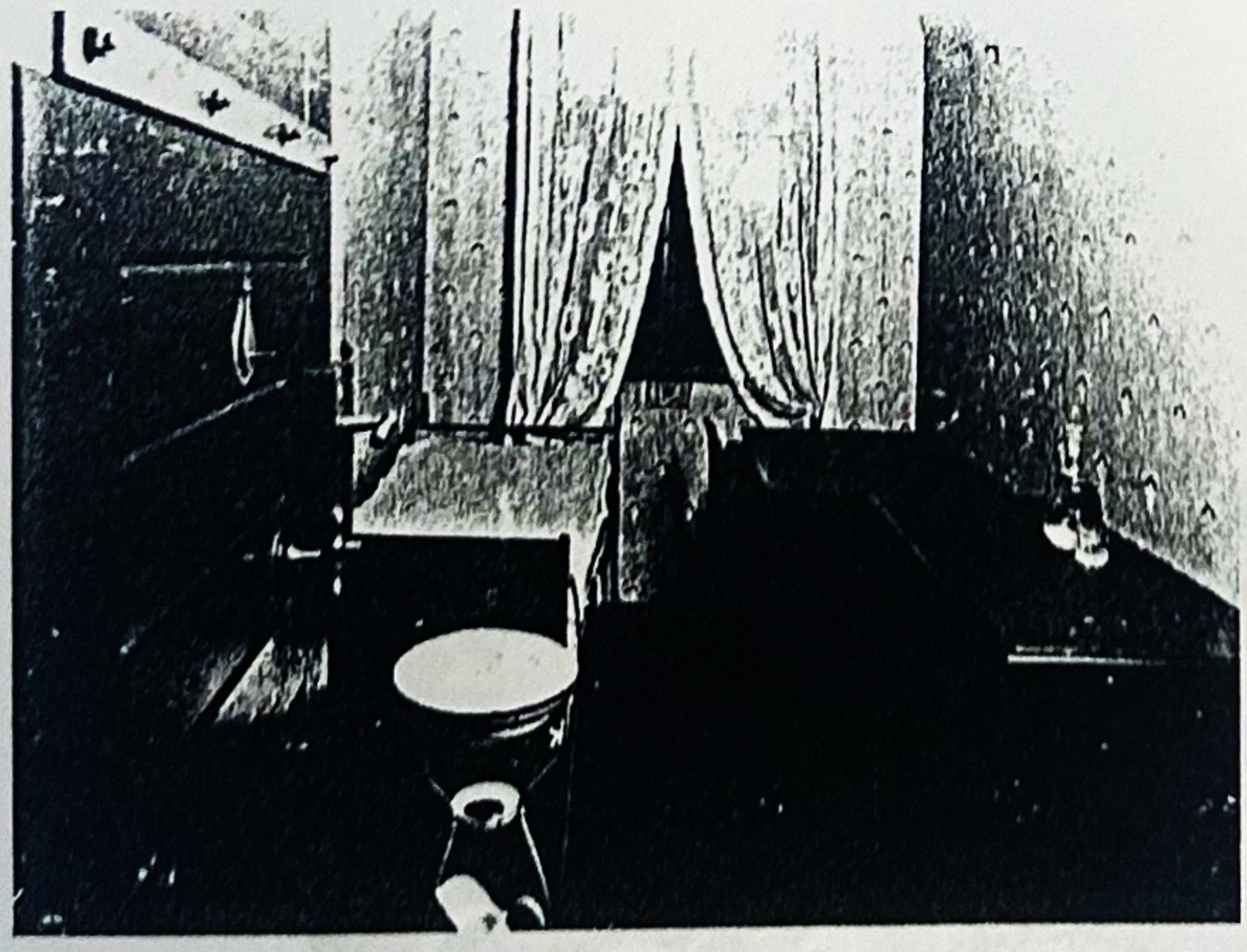
simple labels given to Rosa Luxemburg, to find out who she really was. The answer, of course, is that there is no simple answer. Until her name is utterly forgotten and historians cease to study her, new facets of Luxemburg's character will continue to emerge.

Police identification, Warsaw, 1906





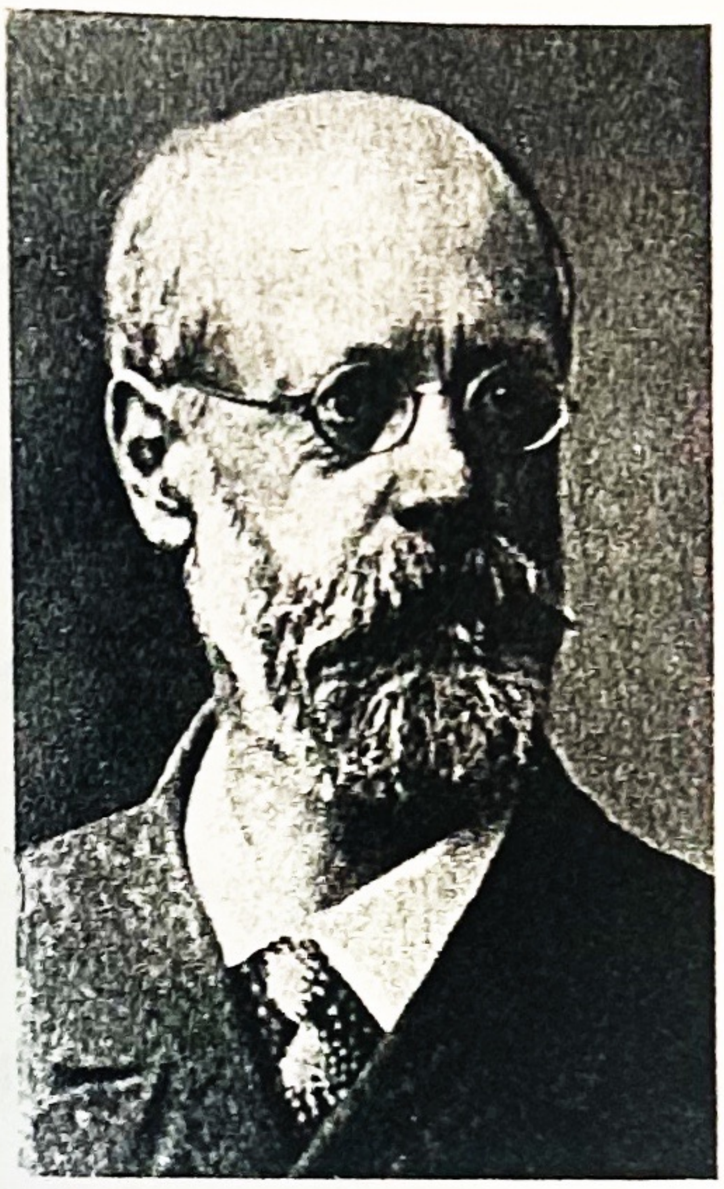
Leo (Lev) Jogiches
before 1889



Prison cell in Wronki, 1916-1917



Luise Kautsky



Karl Kautsky



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