

Rosa Luxemburg and the Russian Revolution¹

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After Antonio Gramsci, the great Italian Marxist, who was redesigned and re-packaged wholesale so as to be made a liberal socialist alternative to Lenin and the Bolsheviks, it is now the turn of Rosa Luxemburg to be harnessed to a similar task. The dichotomy that is sought is the counterposition of Luxemburg to Lenin in the form of “Rosa the democrat vs. Lenin the ruthless dictator”. In this, Luxemburg’s pamphlet on the Russian revolution, written in 1918 while in prison, serves as the major weapon.

The purpose of my presentation is to show that this operation is a hoax since Rosa Luxemburg changed her opinions on the decisive issues discussed in that pamphlet in the heat of the German revolution.

The November revolution of Germany: The twin sister of the October revolution

In order to understand how Rosa Luxemburg changed her views about the policies pursued by the Bolsheviks in the revolution, one has to remember the back-

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ground to her shifting thinking in the two months until her death after she was released from prison. That background is of course provided by the impetuous November revolution in Germany, which occurred almost exactly one year after the October revolution in Russia. The two revolutions are almost twin sisters. Despite the great differences in the history, the class structure and the political regime of the two countries, it is probably impossible to find two revolutions so much alike in history.

No need to describe the main characteristics of the Russian revolution to this audience. You know it much better than I do. The only thing that I would like to highlight is the following: Due to the collaboration of the right-wing of the socialist movement, the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries, with the bourgeoisie, peace was to be brought to Russia only through a second insurrection (this one armed) in October 1917. Only thanks to Soviet power, that is to say, the power of the workers supported by the peasantry, was Russia able to finally withdraw from war officially and completely.

Thus, the October revolution dealt a severe blow to the Great War just when the third year of the war was completed. But the imperialists of all sides had such a great stake in the war that even the deafening thunder of October was not sufficient to bring them to their senses. The war was to last another year with all its ravaging consequences.

Until that fateful month of November 1918, when the workers and soldiers of Germany rose up exactly as their class brothers and sisters had risen in Russia. The sailors started a mutiny in the port city of Kiel on 3rd November, this then spread like wildfire to other cities of the country where the workers and sailors joined the revolt. Six days later, on 9th November, the Imperial Palace in Berlin was taken over by revolutionary workers and a republic declared. The emperor, Wilhelm II, abdicated. On 10th November the government resigned and the right-wing socialist Friedrich Ebert was made prime minister. This was the victory of Germany's February.

The similarities between the February revolution in Russia and the November revolution in Germany are striking. The ruling monarchy in each country came tumbling down in a matter of days after the outbreak of the revolution. In both countries, workers' and soldiers' soviets (councils or "Räte" in German) were set up. In both countries the demand for peace was to be the major engine of the deepening of the revolution. In both countries, soldiers (and in particular sailors of the navy, where skilled workers are a much more important element, Kiel in Germany, the Baltic navy and the Kronstadt sailors in Russia), were to play a prominent part. Finally, and most crucially, in both countries the bourgeoisie had to rely on the right wing of the socialist workers' movement in order to protect its social power intact, turning a wing of the socialist movement into its only guarantee (the Mensheviks in Russia and the right-wing Social Democrats in Germany). The symbolism of dates is also powerful. October, as is widely known, is the date of the Russian revolution according to the old calendar. The date of the October revolution in terms of the cal-

endar now used all around the world is 7th November. In other words, the October revolution is also a “November revolution”. The world was shaken by two almost identical revolutions within the space of exactly one year.

But of course there were important differences as well. The German revolution experienced its own October only two months after the November revolution, on 5th January 1919. On that day an insurrection was set off in Berlin when armed workers took over certain government buildings. Although the insurrection was predominantly spontaneous, as opposed to the Russian insurrection in October, which was meticulously planned by the Bolsheviks under the leadership of Trotsky, the KPD (Communist Party of Germany) of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, established only a week earlier, took its place within the insurrection or even at its head. But the situation was more similar to the July Days in the Russian revolution than October. For Berlin was acting on its own. The rest of Germany had not yet been sufficiently prepared for the taking of power by the proletariat. In a certain sense, this was a juxtaposition of the July Days and the October revolution. It seemed for a moment that the insurrection would be successful. But Ebert, the prime minister, and Gustav Noske, the defence minister, brought into Berlin a force called *Freikorps* consisting of 30 thousand war veterans, reactionary to their core ideologically, which was used to quash the insurrection. These armed bands captured and murdered Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht on 15th January 1919. The German revolution was to be rekindled twice again, once in 1921 and the other in 1923, but was unable to overturn the bourgeois order. Thus was squandered the greatest opportunity the European socialist revolution ever attained and the Russian revolution therefore remained isolated, all thanks to the betrayal of the Social Democrats.

Rosa Luxemburg and the October revolution

So this is the background to the evolving assessment by Rosa Luxemburg of the Russian revolution. We have already pointed out that today she is being used and abused by a large section of the international socialist movement with the purpose of diminishing the stature of the Bolshevik leadership, and in particular of Lenin and Trotsky, by counterposing “Rosa Luxemburg the democrat” to the dictatorial and terroristic methods attributed to the former.

In order to understand how Rosa Luxemburg is being used against Bolshevism and, in particular against Lenin, we have to reduce the problem of the set of disagreements between Lenin and Luxemburg to its relevant part. This we can do in two successive stages. First, there are a host of topics on which there was an ongoing controversy between the two leaders throughout the entirety of their political lives. They had their differences on a multitude of issues such as the party and the varying degree of importance of conscious planning as opposed to spontaneity, the right of nations to self-determination, policies to be pursued by Marxists regarding the Great War, their respective theories of imperialism, and, more concretely, the state of division within the Russian Marxist movement, on which question Rosa Luxemburg accused Lenin more than any other major figure (and her opinions on

this question did have concrete consequences since she was the liaison person between the (Second) International and the movement in Russia). We will leave all these outside of our purview for reasons that will be clear in a moment.

At a second stage, we need to separate those aspects of her critique of the Bolsheviks' policies in the context of the Russian revolution that are relevant to the present-day debate and those that are not. Rosa Luxemburg criticised the Bolsheviks on a number of issues with respect to the policies they pursued after they took power. She was in sharp disagreement with their agrarian policy as well as their application of the right of nations to self-determination along with their policies on some other minor issues. But these are not aspects that are relevant to the operation whereby the image of a more democratic Rosa Luxemburg is raised against Lenin and Trotsky who are accused of ruthlessly repressing all opposition. The crux of the Luxemburg vs. Lenin paradigm in today's debate is the idea that the anti-democratic approach adopted by the Bolsheviks in power is to be blamed for the future plight of the Russian revolution. There did exist an alternative, which is put forth by Rosa Luxemburg, albeit in its bare outlines, in her pamphlet *The Russian Revolution*. Such is the idea in its barest outline.

If this depiction of the question is faithful to its true nature, then we need not take up either the overall lifetime differences between Lenin and Luxemburg. Nor do we need to linger on questions such as the land policy of the Bolsheviks or their policy of self-determination for oppressed nations. We can legitimately limit our examination to the question of democracy within the context of the Russian revolution.

This also has several dimensions: the most important is the famous question of the Constituent Assembly. But there are others: the question of the place of violent methods within a revolution and that of the freedom of expression, particularly in the form of the freedom of the press. These are the three questions on which Rosa Luxemburg is said to hold ideas that differ radically from Lenin and the Bolsheviks. The evidence for these allegations derives, as we have already mentioned, from a pamphlet that Rosa Luxemburg penned in September and early October 1918 while still in prison. This pamphlet has become renowned under the title *The Russian Revolution*. First, we need to take a closer look at this pamphlet since its story is very relevant to the assessment of the alleged differences between Lenin and Luxemburg.

The adventurous life of the pamphlet *The Russian Revolution*

Readers of Rosa Luxemburg's *The Russian Revolution* naturally think, unless they are well-versed in the history of the period in question, that the author simply wrote this pamphlet and had it published. What is natural for the ordinary reader is not for those who hide behind Rosa Luxemburg to attack Lenin. They should know better. They should be more serious about their source. The pamphlet *The Russian Revolution* was never published in Luxemburg's lifetime. The other leaders

of the Spartacus League, the predecessor of the Communist Party of Germany (the KPD), convinced her that this would play into the hands of the counter-revolution. Whether one finds this kind of consideration right or wrong (and we tend to believe it is right, given the circumstances of the moment), it is a kind of disdain regarding the choice made by Luxemburg herself to hide this from her younger readers.

When Luxemburg wrote the pamphlet, she was biding time in a prison in Wrocław/Breslau in the part of Poland under German domination. She had been in prison from before the outbreak of the Russian revolution. This implies that her information on Russia was inevitably uneven and partial. Rosa Luxemburg was assassinated three months after the writing of this pamphlet and two months after the coming of the German revolution.

The Russian Revolution was published posthumously in 1922 out of pure vengeance. The person who decided to have it published was Paul Levi, a Spartacist and later a leader of the KPD, who also happened to be Rosa Luxemburg's lover in the last part of her life. Ironically, Levi himself was the person who had visited her in prison in 1918 and done the convincing that the pamphlet should not be published! And because he was her lover, Rosa had turned the manuscript over to him in order for him to keep it. Levi was later, in 1921, expelled from the KPD for having blatantly violated party discipline. The Comintern upheld this decision. Lenin was of the opinion that Levi should be readmitted to the party after a while. But Levi converted the row within the KPD into an attack on the party and the Comintern. The pamphlet *The Russian Revolution* was thus published as a result of the feelings of vengeance of Paul Levi on the Bolsheviks, the major force within the Comintern.

Two historic figures closest to Rosa Luxemburg both politically and on a personal level, Clara Zetkin and Leo Jogiches, were against the publication of the pamphlet. The reason was not the earlier urge of protecting the Russian revolution from its enemies. At this stage, it was more fundamental. They both knew that after having been released from prison and while leading the German revolution, Rosa Luxemburg had changed her outlook under the impact of the concrete experience of the relationship of classes and political forces clashing in a revolutionary situation.

Zetkin is one of the most prominent figures of the German communist movement. She was, alongside Luxemburg and Liebknecht as well as Franz Mehring and others, one of the leaders of the Spartakusbund and later of the KPD. She is perhaps the closest female friend and comrade of Luxemburg. As for Leo Jogiches, he may be considered the Sverdlov of the Polish Marxist movement, not a theoretician but the ultimate organiser, the one who was behind all the organisational achievements of the movement in action. And when Luxemburg and he were both young, he had been her lover. They remained the closest of friends ever after. Jogiches was assassinated by the counterrevolutionaries in March 1919, only two months after Luxemburg and Liebknecht. Hence it is through Clara Zetkin that we know that Jogiches was also firmly against the publication of this pamphlet, as it no longer represented the true thinking of Luxemburg. As soon as the pamphlet was published by Levi, Zetkin started to write what turned into a book-length riposte, which was published

within the same year of 1922.²

The defenders of the “Rosa the democrat vs. Lenin the ruthless dictator” scenario will dismiss all of this by retorting: “What if Zetkin and Jogiches were against the publication of the pamphlet? Why do you want to hide the pamphlet from the younger generations?” That would be a total misunderstanding of our intention in bringing up the controversy around the act of publication of the pamphlet. Of course, a piece of writing by a Marxist of Luxemburg’s stature should be available to younger generations long after the delicate moments of the Russian revolution have been left behind and, *a fortiori*, today. But Zetkin’s objection was not simply based on an assertion, without proof or evidence, that Rosa had changed her opinions on the questions she raised in her pamphlet. No, Zetkin provided, in a book-length study, the evidence that proves her claim to this effect.

Then there is another testimony, this time not from the German movement but from among the Polish communists. This is Jerzy Warszawski, writing under the *nom-de-guerre* Adolf Warski. He as well as Zetkin wrote a pamphlet, this one titled *Rosa Luxemburg’s Position on the Tactical Problems of the Revolution*³ in that same fateful year of 1922 in response to the publication of Luxemburg’s pamphlet by Levi. The fact that he is from the Polish movement provides him with the advantage of some additional documentary evidence as to the change of mind that came on to Rosa Luxemburg at the time of the German revolution, which she did not neglect transmitting to her Polish comrades as well.

The Constituent Assembly

Among all the various criticisms that Rosa Luxemburg had of the Bolsheviks’ policy laid down in the pamphlet, the discussion on the Constituent Assembly is the fundamental area of debate for at least two reasons. For one thing, this institution is the locus of political power. As the most important question of any revolution is the question of power, the debate on whether this institution is the right institution for a proletarian revolution is primordial. The other aspect is that this is the most important *theoretical* question among the matters of contention: what is the form of state best suited to establish proletarian power? So we start with the question of the Constituent Assembly.

Let us first remind the reader what the debate on the Constituent Assembly was in the course of the Russian revolution. This assembly was conceived as the authority to draw up a constitution in order to establish a bourgeois democratic republic in the vacuum created by the abdication of the Tsar in the wake of the February revolution. In the eight months that the bourgeoisie ruled over the country with the

² Clara Zetkin, *Rosa Luxemburg’s Views on the Russian Revolution*, RedStar Publishers, 2017 (originally published by the Communist International in 1922).

³ Adolf Warski, *Rosa Luxemburg’s Position on the Tactical Problems of the Revolution*, published originally by the Comintern in 1922.

support of the right-wing socialists, it refrained from initiating solutions regarding any of the burning questions the country faced as it also eschewed the question of setting up a Constituent Assembly. This assembly was elected after the October revolution, convened to meet in January, but was dissolved on the first day that it convened. The Bolsheviks had two reasons adduced for the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, one informal and the other official. The first one, advanced by both Lenin and Trotsky, held that the overwhelming support received by the Social Revolutionaries in the elections to the Constituent Assembly reflected the balance of forces that predated the October revolution. In her pamphlet, Luxemburg agrees with this reasoning and finds Lenin and Trotsky in the right on this question. What she criticises them for is that they could have held new elections rather than dissolve the assembly definitively.

Here, the importance of a point we have already indicated comes out openly. Rosa Luxemburg thinks that the elections to the Constituent Assembly took place “long before the October revolution”. This, as we all know, is outright wrong. The elections were held after the Bolsheviks came to power. The voters’ rosters were prepared before the revolution, though, and this is the basis for the claim on the part of Lenin and Trotsky that the composition of the assembly represented pre-revolutionary Russia. The fact that Rosa Luxemburg was unaware of such a basic piece of information as the election date is a striking example of how little her possibilities were to receive sound news in her prison in Wrocław/Breslau. It was, of course, inevitable that with information so patchy there would be problems in producing a true picture of the situation in Russia.

The Russian Revolution does not even mention the major (and official) reason the Bolsheviks put forth for the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. This is the fact that the majority in the Constituent Assembly did not agree that the Soviet system should be the source of sovereignty and that the Constituent Assembly should be subordinated to that overriding sovereignty. Rosa Luxemburg, so it seems, was not able to access this crucial piece of information in her prison. This reason is crucial in the sense that the Bolsheviks are thereby refusing to permit the formation anew of a situation of dual power after the Soviets took power at a certain stage of the revolution. Luxemburg is unaware of this decisive consideration.

In order to fully understand the reasoning here, it would be best to read the text of the decision taken by the All-Russia Soviet Central Executive Committee. The draft was drawn up by none other than Lenin.

The October Revolution, by giving power to the Soviets, and through the Soviets to the working and exploited classes, aroused the desperate resistance of the exploiters, and in the crushing of this resistance it fully revealed itself as the beginning of the socialist revolution. The working classes learned by experience that the old bourgeois parliamentary system had outlived its purpose and was absolutely incompatible with the aim of achieving socialism, and that not national institutions, but only class institutions (such as the Soviets) were capable of overcoming the resistance of the propertied classes and of laying the foundations of socialist

society. To relinquish the sovereign power of the Soviets, to relinquish the Soviet Republic won by the people, for the sake of the bourgeois parliamentary system and the Constituent Assembly, would now be a step backwards and would cause the collapse of the October workers' and peasants' revolution. (...)

Accordingly, the Central Executive Committee resolves that the Constituent Assembly is hereby dissolved.⁴

What critics are at a loss to understand is the following: Once the Constituent Assembly becomes a sovereign institution alongside the Soviet, there will be a return to a situation similar to the duality of power between the Kerensky government and the Soviets. In other words, the revolution will have been liquidated.

Let us now turn to the German revolution. Rosa Luxemburg faced precisely the same kind of situation in the German revolution and, together with all the other Spartacists, understood the question to its innermost essence. The German revolution being the twin sister of the Russian one, there existed there too, side by side, on the one hand, the Räte (German word for the soviets) and, on the other hand, the prospective National Assembly, which was meant to act as a constituent assembly. Faced with this prospect of a situation of dual power, *Die Rote Fahne*, the Spartacist central organ, of which Rosa Luxemburg was the editor-in-chief, had this to say as early as 29th November, in other words only a month and a half after the writing of the pamphlet *The Russian Revolution* was finished:

There are only two positions possible in this matter, as in all others. Either one wants the National Assembly as a means to cheat the proletariat of its power by paralyzing its class energy and dissolving its ultimate socialist goals in a blue haze. Or one wants to put all the power in the hands of the proletariat, to develop the revolution that had already begun into a powerful class struggle for a socialist society and for that purpose to establish the political rule of the great mass of the working people, the dictatorship of the workers' and soldiers' councils. For or against socialism, against or for the National Assembly, there is no third choice.⁵

Is it conceivable that a political leader who poses the question in such a stark form for the German revolution should still be advocating the Constituent Assembly for the Russian Revolution?

Questions of democracy and dictatorship

In the little time that I have, I will only touch upon two issues that pertain to the question of a more general counterposition of Luxemburg to Lenin regarding democracy. The first is the idea that Luxemburg regarded the suppression of the political rights of the Mensheviks as anathema. In the heat of the German revolution,

4 V. I. Lenin, "Draft Decree on the Dissolution of the Constituent Assembly", *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977, volume 26, pp. 434-436.

5 Zetkin, op. cit., pp. 66-67.

though, she acted in exactly the same manner as the Bolsheviks with regard to the freedoms of the counter-revolutionary wing of the socialists.

Faced with the occupation of the offices of the newspaper *Vorwärts*, which was the mouthpiece of the right-wing of the Social Democratic Party, this is what she wrote in *Die Rote Fahne*:

If the masses occupy the “Vorwärts”, then it is the duty of the Revolutionary Stewards and the central committee of the USPD of Greater Berlin, who indeed officially claim to represent the Berlin workers, to ensure immediate editorial guidance in the interests of the revolutionary workers of Berlin. Where have the editors gone? What are Däumig, Ledebour—journalists of reputation and profession, who now as the left of the USPD do not possess an organ—doing, why are they letting the masses down? Was it a more urgent matter to “advise” instead of act?⁶

Is it not clear that Rosa Luxemburg is entirely prepared to suppress the freedom of expression of right-wing socialists because their voice is the voice of the counter-revolution? (Anyone who thinks this is far-fetched should remember that Luxemburg and Liebknecht were assassinated on the basis of an act of collaboration between the gentlemen of the Social Democratic government and the reactionary *Freikorps*.)

The other point has to do with the use of force and compulsion and violence in the struggle to accomplish the proletarian revolution. This is what Rosa Luxemburg had to say on this question:

All this resistance [of the counter-revolution] must be broken step by step, with an iron fist and ruthless energy. The violence of the bourgeois counter-revolution must be confronted with the revolutionary violence of the proletariat. ... Against the threatened dangers of the counter-revolution, the arming of the people and the disarming of the ruling classes ... the concentrated, compact, and fully developed power of the working class.⁷

And these are the programmatic demands on this question that Rosa Luxemburg formulated at the end of her life struggling in the vortex of the German revolution: “Arming of the entire adult male proletarian population as a workers’ militia” as well as the “creation of a Red Guard of proletarians as an active part of the militia for the constant protection of the Revolution against counter-revolutionary attacks and subversions.”⁸

Adolf Warski’s personal testimony is also very useful in transmitting to us information that cannot be found elsewhere. I will content myself with a single citation. At the end of November 1918 or the beginning of December 1919, Rosa Luxem-

6 Warski, op. cit., p. 25.

7 Ibid, p. 16.

8 Ibid.

burg sends a message to her Polish comrades through a German soldier in her native Polish. Having noted that they, too, took a position of support, but only critical support towards the Bolsheviks, she continues to write these lines:

I too shared all your reservations and doubts, but on the most important questions have dropped them and in many cases have not gone as far as you. ... [T]he Bolshevik terror is, above all, an expression of the weakness of the European proletariat. ... But here too the truth holds good—that even the greatest revolution can only accomplish what development has ripened. This sore point too can only be healed through the European revolution. And this is coming! ...⁹

Conclusion

I will finish this discussion by making one last quotation from Rosa Luxemburg. This one is not from the time of the German revolution, but from the time *before* she had changed her mind. The following are the last three paragraphs of Rosa Luxemburg's pamphlet, *The Russian Revolution*.

Let the German Government Socialists cry that the rule of the Bolsheviks in Russia is a distorted expression of the dictatorship of the proletariat. If it was or is such, that is only because it is a product of the behavior of the German proletariat, in itself a distorted expression of the socialist class struggle. All of us are subject to the laws of history, and it is only internationally that the socialist order of society can be realized. The Bolsheviks have shown that they are capable of everything that a genuine revolutionary party can contribute within the limits of historical possibilities. They are not supposed to perform miracles. For a model and faultless proletarian revolution in an isolated land, exhausted by world war, strangled by imperialism, betrayed by the international proletariat, would be a miracle.

What is in order is to distinguish the essential from the non-essential, the kernel from the accidental excrescencies in the politics of the Bolsheviks. In the present period, when we face decisive final struggles in all the world, the most important problem of socialism was and is the burning question of our time. It is not a matter of this or that secondary question of tactics, but of the capacity for action of the proletariat, the strength to act, the will to power of socialism as such. In this, Lenin and Trotsky and their friends were the *first*, those who went ahead as an example to the proletariat of the world; they are still the *only ones* up to now who can cry with Hutten: "I have dared!"

This is the essential and *enduring* in Bolshevik policy. In *this* sense theirs is the immortal historical service of having marched at the head of the international proletariat with the conquest of political power and the practical placing of the problem of the realization of socialism, and of having advanced mightily the settlement of the score between capital and labor in the entire world. In Russia, the problem could only be posed. It could not be solved in Russia. And in *this* sense, the future everywhere belongs to "Bolshevism."

This is Rosa Luxemburg.

⁹ Ibid, p. 11.