

# The greatest revolutionary woman in history: Rosa Luxemburg

Armağan Tulunay

*“Here lies, buried  
Rosa Luxemburg  
A Jewess from Poland,  
A pioneer of the German working class  
Killed on the orders of  
The German oppressors. You, the oppressed ones,  
Bury your discord!”  
Bertolt Brecht*

In the wake of Germany’s 1918 November revolution, the Berlin uprising on 5 January was crushed by the reactionary bands called Freikorps organized by war veterans, under direct orders of social democrat Friedrich Ebert and defense minister Gustav Noske. Despite all the pressure on Spartacists, now called the German Communist Party, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht refused to leave Berlin and instead hid in party sympathizers’ homes in working class

neighbourhoods, playing hide and seek with the German police and Freikorps. House number 43 in the Mannheimer street was to be their last stop. In the night of 14 January, they were caught by the reactionary forces and brought to Eden Hotel, occupied by the Infantry Guard Regiment of captain Waldemar Pabst. After an identity check as a mere formality and an interrogation, captain Pabst talked with the social democrat defense minister Noske and ordered the transfer of Luxemburg and Liebknecht to Moabit prison. In fact, he was given permission to execute both. Karl Liebknecht was shot at the head after being severely tortured and his corpse left at a mortuary of the nameless. On the other hand, Rosa Luxemburg, supposedly taken out of the hotel for prison transfer, was beaten to death and her corpse thrown to Landwehr canal. When her corpse was finally recovered months later, on 31 March, it was unrecognizable. Noske, fearful even of the corpse, tried to get rid of it but the news quickly spread. Rosa was identified by her friend only by some pieces of her gloves and a medallion. A grand funeral was organized for them on 25 January, Rosa missing. On 13 June, the streets were once again filled with revolutionary workers and soldiers and Rosa was buried next to Liebknecht.

Mathilde Jacob recalls a moment just before her grave was covered with red flags, accompanied by the singing of Internationale: “A youth delegate used the words of Heinrich Heine in her speech: ‘I am the sword, I am the fire. I illuminated you in the darkness and rushed forward in the wake of battle, fought on the frontlines. My friends’ corpses lie beside me (...)’. But we have no time to rejoice nor mourn. The trumpets call, a new war begins.”<sup>1</sup>

Rosa Luxemburg is of the same age as the first working-class state of 1871 Paris Commune. She was born with the revolution, lived for the revolution and died for the revolution. Just as Trotsky, one of the two great leaders of the October revolution, said after Luxemburg and Liebknecht: “To be sure reaction could not have chosen more illustrious victims. What a sure blow! And small wonder! Reaction and revolution knew each other well as in this case reaction was personified in the guise of the former leaders of the former party of the working class, Scheidemann, and Ebert whose names will be forever inscribed in the black book of history as the shameful names of the chief organizers of this treacherous murder.”<sup>2</sup> 100 years have passed since that dark night of 15 January 1919 in Berlin. Rosa ended her article with “I was, I am, I shall be!” She wasn’t talking about herself, but the revolution. Against those who cheered the defeat of the 5 January uprising with “order prevails in Berlin”, she was giving voice to the proletarian revolution:

---

1 Annelies Laschitzka, *Rosa Luxemburg. Her Şeye Rağmen, Tutkuyla Yaşamak*, Turkish tr. Levent Bakaç, İstanbul: Yordam Books, 2008, p. 475.

2 Leon Trotsky, “Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg”, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/profiles/rosa.htm>.

“You foolish lackeys! Your ‘order’ is built on sand. Tomorrow the revolution will ‘rise up again, clashing its weapons,’ and to your horror, it will proclaim with trumpets blazing: I was, I am, I shall be!”<sup>3</sup> Now as ever, when capitalism brings the whole mankind to its demise, when the maxim of “socialism or barbarism” is truer than ever; revolution is looking for its leadership all over the world through the countless uprisings and movements, waiting for its time to rise up. After 100 years, the legacy of Rosa Luxemburg survives through the struggles today.

### **A life of struggle since childhood**

Rosa Luxemburg was born on 5 March 1871 in the Polish city of Zamosc under Russian rule. She was the last child of a Jewish family. Her family moved to Warsaw when she was three. She began her first struggle with life there when she was merely a child. She was confined to bed for a year after her leg was encased in plaster due to a problem in her hip bone when she was five. She faced another problem after the cast was removed: her encased leg was shorter than the other and this made her limp for the rest of her life. In 1880 Rosa entered exams in Warsaw to qualify for the Russian secondary school for girls. It wasn’t easy to be admitted to a Russian school as a Jew. The school had a quota for Jewish students, but Rosa considered entering the school due to the quota dishonorable. This wasn’t the only discrimination she faced. Her native language was Polish, but the school’s was Russian. Her country, Poland, was not free. To add to all of that, she was limping. And this 10 years old girl challenged all that. She tried to walk in a way that didn’t show her limping; since this made her walk slowly, she left for school early; she put immense effort to learn Russian quickly. Perhaps the seeds of a revolutionary were seeded back then, against all these inequalities. She wrote this widely circulated poem, despite being in Polish, then:

I demand retribution.  
To those enjoying themselves, well fed,  
No idea how millions earn bread  
Never knew, never felt.  
A smiling face,  
A cheerful laughter  
Brings pain to me  
As those condemned  
To poverty and ignorance  
Never knew cheer nor smile.  
All their troubles,  
All their hidden tears

---

3 Rosa Luxemburg, “Order Prevails in Berlin”, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1919/01/14.htm>.

Should be put on the conscious of the gilded,  
And avenge all they have done.<sup>4</sup>

In the back of a photograph she gifted to a school friend, she wrote: “My ideal is a social order where I can love anyone. In order to get to that, in pursuit of this ideal I may need to learn to hate as well”. And she did, her hatred against the enemies of the proletariat, her class grudge against bourgeois made Rosa the Rosa Luxemburg that we know.

In Warsaw, she contacted an organization called Proletariat, formed by a small group of intellectuals and a workers committee. At the age of 17, during a debate on the choice between an organization like Russian Narodniks or a proletarian one like German social democrats, she chose a proletarian revolutionary organization. As the proletarian organization made a significant impact in a short time, the state oppression increased. Many of its members got arrested. After hiding for a period, Rosa Luxemburg left for Zurich via illegal means, hiding in haystacks. Then, Switzerland was the only country allowing women to study at a university. Rosa started her university education in the natural sciences and mathematics field but later changed to economy and law, graduating in 1897. But she got her real education outside of the Zurich University. At that time, Switzerland was a safe haven and a place of exile for Russian and Polish revolutionaries. She met people like the “father” of Russian Marxism Plekhanov, Vera Zasulich and Axelrod there. She was constantly reading and discussing with Russian and Polish political refugees.

Her longtime comrade and lover Leo Jogiches also entered her life then. She ignored and belittled the struggle for the freedom of Poland occupied by three separate countries; deeming it nationalistic and instead, calling for the joint struggle of Russian and Polish workers; criticizing Poland Socialist Party (PPS) in that direction. In line with this criticism, she was among the founders of Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland (SDKP). During this time, she became the lead author and editor of the party publication *Workers' Cause*.

She represented the party, shortly after its foundation, at the II. International Congress in 1893. She passed her first test in a public speech in front of a group of almost only men including names such as Engels and Plekhanov. She pleads for the acceptance of SDKP's membership application to II. International. A witness of this speech described the scene like this: “She was a small woman with a disproportionately large head. A small nose on an otherwise typical Jewish face... She was obviously limping, with frequent stops. She did not give the best first impression, but after a short while you saw her as the smart, lively and energetic woman as she was”.

---

<sup>4</sup> Laschitza, p. 22 [re-translated from Turkish].

A Belgian socialist present at the venue, Emile Vandervelde says: “At the age of 23, Rosa was unknown in the German and socialist circles. (...) She was a tough nut for her opponents. I still can’t forget how she pushed her way through the delegates to stand on a chair, in order to be better heard. She wore a specially sewn beautiful dress to hide her slim, tiny figure and her disability. She defended her theses so passionately, with such fire in her eyes that the majority of the mesmerized delegates voted to accept her delegacy.”<sup>5</sup> Even though this vote was in her favor, a later voting meant that SDKP’s membership would only happen later in 1896 in London Conference. Right after its acceptance in International, Tsarist police forces increased their repression on SDKP; most of its militants were arrested. The organization soon lacked the funds to even publish *Workers’ Cause* and disbanded. Rosa could have worked to refound the organization in Poland. Instead, she opted to work in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) which was at the heart of the international movement and possessed immense prestige and influence over it.

In order to avoid being deported from Germany for political reasons, she arranged a fake marriage with a German immigrant she met in Zurich and left for Berlin on 12 May 1898. This was a journey that transformed Rosa from an unknown Polish communist to a theoretician that had a significant impact on the debates in SPD, the largest social democratic party in the world, and even in the Second International; and a heroic revolutionary later. In the rest of this article, instead of chronicling her life as we have done until now, we will try to discuss Rosa with her place in the history of Marxism and her special traits.

### **“If you think a speech of mine won’t attract attention, you are mistaken”**

Her speech at the Zurich Congress made a surprising impact, yet Rosa Luxemburg was unknown in Berlin, and she didn’t stand out with her agitation skills to her acquaintances. Furthermore, she was in the same environment with the heavy hitters of International. She was Jewish and Polish. She was a young person at 27. Most importantly, she was a woman. But Rosa did not let any of these keep her down. It was an election year when she arrived in Berlin and she was tested by her duties during this time and proved herself to the party.

She had to know the party policies by heart to be successful at election activities. After arriving at Berlin in the middle of May, she read all party publications she could find in a couple of weeks and learned the policies in their slightest details. At the beginning of June, she was sent to Upper Silesia, an old Polish city annexed by Prussia in 18. century, to agitate among Polish workers. This

---

<sup>5</sup> Elzbieta Ettinger, *Rosa Luxemburg Bir Yaşam*, İstanbul: Belge Publishing House, 2008, p. 70 [re-translated from Turkish].

had been a resounding success for Rosa. Mining workers, who had never seen a female orator before, were mesmerized by this tiny Polish-speaking woman who made them proud of their forbidden native language. The word travelled from mouth to mouth of the “woman from Poland”; meeting venues were filled with people wanting to listen to her speeches; all of her speeches ended with enthusiastic applause.<sup>6</sup>

Rosa talked about her success in one of her stops during Silesia tour in a letter she wrote to Jogiches: “Everything was perfect at Goldberg yesterday. The meeting room was chock full, and a sizeable crowd outside, they were standing on top of each other to be able to look inside from the windows. Comrades told me that they have never seen such a crowd before”.<sup>7</sup> She regretted not being able to make these speeches in Dresden, Leipzig or Berlin, they would make such an impact. She prepared for that day, studying Germany meticulously. Once she told Jogiches that she could speak German like Bismarck, she could give a conference “no worse than Bebel” and “in no later than six months she will be one of the best orators in the party”.<sup>8</sup>

In response to the Jogiches’ concerns before the Upper Silesia tour she said: “If you think a speech of mine won’t attract attention, you are mistaken”. She was right in that. Rosa Luxemburg kept getting better and better as an orator, and she not only gained the love of the workers but also the contempt of the social democrats on their way out of working-class ranks and finally, of course, the contempt of bourgeois. Trotsky writes:

I remember how, at a congress at Jena I think, her high voice, taut like a wire, cut through the wild protestations of opportunists from Bavaria, Baden and elsewhere. How they hated her! And how she despised them! Small and fragilely built she mounted the platform of the Congress as the personification of the proletarian revolution. By the force of her logic and the power of her sarcasm, she silenced her most avowed opponents. Rosa knew how to hate the enemies of the proletariat and just because of this she knew how to arouse their hatred for her. She had been identified by them early on.<sup>9</sup>

---

6 Ettinger, p. 108 [re-translated from Turkish].

7 Rosa Luxemburg, *Sevgiliye Mektuplar: Yoldaşım ve Sevgilim [Letters to Jogiches]*, tr. Nuran Yavuz, İstanbul: Agora Kitaplığı, 2006, p. 43.

8 Ettinger, p.108 [re-translated from Turkish].

9 Leon Trotsky, “Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg”, 1919, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/profiles/rosa.htm>.

## A great theoretician, a sharp pen

Rosa Luxemburg was not just a good orator, but also a theoretician with a firm understanding of politics and an author with a sharp pen. Her Ph.D. thesis, which she completed in Zurich in 1897, can be seen as her first comprehensive work. The thesis studying the industrial growth of Poland was later turned into a book that garnered a big response, many articles discussing it. In one such article, Robert Seidel, a friend from Zurich writing at a periodical called *People's Law* (*Volksrecht*) writes: "Our comrade's book is a short book of merely 95 pages, yet it has more content and substance than many thick books. The book reviews a large literature in Polish, Russian and other languages. When we say 'reviewed' we do not mean simply copied, as most people do, but rather processed with original thought. The book is not the work of a developing mind, rather it is the ripe fruit of a developed one. No doubt, Rosa Luxemburg is one of the most important names working on Poland and Russia, and will continue to excite us."<sup>10</sup>

The brilliance of this work as seen by her contemporaries, and celebrated as revolutionary by her comrades, is the brilliance that will make her a leading theoretician among her contemporaries in German Social Democracy. She had a bright mind. But she did not content with it, instead, she carefully combined her intellect with exceptional energy and discipline, a meticulousness that considered every little detail. She questioned ideas with no regard to their originators, instead of being content with her current knowledge she would keep reading to reinforce her arguments. She wrote masterfully, using striking metaphors and expressing herself in a brave and efficient manner.

She already had a formal university education in economy. She developed novel theses on the historical conditions of capital accumulation, reproduction of capital and conflicts in this process, dissolution of primitive communist societies before class societies and analysis of this process in different regions and societies. She did not just work on economics but also on the national problem, wars, struggles of the masses, the spontaneity of mass movements and party-organization issues. Even though she was highlighted in her struggle against Bernstein revisionism and her anti-imperialist-war stance together with Liebknecht, her theoretical contributions were not limited to these, instead encompassed a much larger field.

Trotsky comments: "By the force of the strength of her theoretical thought and her ability to generalize Rosa Luxemburg was a whole head above not only her opponents but also her comrades. She was a woman of genius. Her style, tense, precise, brilliant and merciless, will remain forever a true mirror of her thought."<sup>11</sup>

---

10 Laschitza, p. 73 [re-translated from Turkish].

11 Leon Trotsky, "Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg", 1919, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/profiles/rosa.htm>.

## **Defender of Marxism against revisionism**

Eduard Bernstein was a theoretician who was exiled from Germany during the days of the anti-socialist law, he lived in London and was considered respectable for a while. He led the newspaper published by socialist refugees. His thoughts which were published as a small Manifesto in the central publication of German Social Democratic Workers' Party, was heavily criticized by Marx and Engels in 1879.<sup>12</sup> In all likelihood, he did not dare go further while Engels was alive and once he was dead, Bernstein started writing a series of articles named "problems of socialism" in the theoretical journal of the German party, *New Times (Neue Zeit)* starting from 1896.

Bernstein presented his opinions as some innovations on Marxism, taking into account the changing concrete situation; but in fact, this was an assault on the revolutionary essence of Marxism. Rosa Luxemburg was not the first to criticize Bernstein revisionism in German social democracy but she was the first to oppose the revisionist assault on Marxism with a holistic ideological and theoretical struggle. Rosa Luxemburg was almost a step ahead of even Lenin and Trotsky in Marxist theory. She was the first to identify that the path of Kautsky, so-called "father of Marxism", would lead to Bernsteinism even though at the time Kautsky had kept his distance from Bernstein's revisions.

To summarize Bernstein's thoughts: according to him, capitalism's development makes its downfall impossible. Because capitalism has adapted. The development of the credit system, means of transportation and communication, cartels and trusts have become tools of harmonic continuation of the economy. Aside from this, as the field of production gets more diverse, more and more of the working class becomes a part of the middle class, solidifying the middle class. Finally, as the trade unions develop and through their struggles, conditions of the working class get better. As a result, the contradictions of capitalism do not get intensified as predicted by the theory and it won't. Bernstein's conclusions from these findings are that the goal should not be to take capitalism down by revolution but rather tame it through reforms. Bernstein tried to present his deviation from Marxism not as such but as the correct way of reaching socialism. He did that by distorting the Marxist method; but presented his theses as a calm analysis of the concrete realities, a renovation of Marxism while staying in it.

Rosa Luxemburg studied Bernstein's article series and the book titled "*Preconditions of Socialism*" and started a front for the revolutionary program of the working class against revisionism. Her article titled *Social Reform or Revolution?*, later made into a brochure, was published in seven parts in September 1898. There she proved in every detail what kind of a swamp Bernstein found

---

<sup>12</sup> Sungur Savran, "120 yıl sonra Friedrich Engels", *Devrimci Marksizm*, no 25, Kış 2015-2016, p. 203-205.



himself. She was aware of the implied comparison in the title of her article and insisted that while defending the revolution one does not need to oppose reforms, but instead these two are inseparably connected and that reforms are crucial tools for the revolutionary struggle and the revolution itself is the final goal. On the other hand, Bernstein's famous words "The movement is everything, the final goal is nothing" very clearly state separation between these two and how he had abandoned the final goal of revolution, substituting it with reforms.

It is one thing to say capitalism's contradictions haven't intensified as predicted, but completely another thing to say that it won't ever be, or that it is capable of creating new mechanisms that will solve its contradictions and crisis. The first one is a claim on the speed of its development, while the other points to a change in its direction. By stating that capitalism can create new mechanisms of harmony, Bernstein debases socialism, deposes its status of historical inevitability. This leads him to focus not into the revolutionary abolishment of capitalism and its contradictions but rather relaxing them as already being done by class struggle. Against the claims of another revisionist social democrat Konrad Schmidt that "appetite grows as one eats" meaning the workers will always want more after each successful small reform and therefore focusing only on small reforms will not necessarily disengage the workers from socialism; Rosa Luxemburg argues:

Konrad Schmidt simply falls back on the idea that an apparently mechanical movement, once started, cannot stop by itself, because "one's appetite grows with the eating," and the working class will not supposedly content itself with reforms till the final socialist transformation is realized. Now the last mentioned condition is quite real. Its effectiveness is guaranteed by the very insufficiency of capitalist reforms. But the conclusion drawn from it could only be true if it were possible to construct an unbroken chain of augmented reforms leading from the capitalism of today to socialism. This is, of course, sheer fantasy. In accordance with the nature of things as they are the chain breaks quickly, and the paths that the supposed forward movement can take from the point on are many and varied. What will be the immediate result should our party change its general procedure to suit a viewpoint that wants to emphasize the practical results of our struggle, that is social reforms? As soon as "immediate results" become the principal aim of our activity, the clear-cut, irreconcilable point of view, which has meaning only in so far as it proposes to win power, will be found more and more inconvenient. The direct consequence of this will be the adoption by the party of a "policy of compensation," a policy of political trading, and an attitude of diffident, diplomatic conciliation. But this attitude cannot be continued for a long time. Since the social reforms can only offer an empty promise, the logical consequence of such a program must necessarily be disillusionment.<sup>13</sup>

---

13 Rosa Luxemburg, "The Consequences of Social Reformism and General Nature of Reformism",

With these words Rosa Luxemburg states that as much as social reforms and revolutions are in some ways reinforcing each other, they are also external to one another in other ways. In her article “Social reform or revolution” she clearly states the destination of reformism and reformist thought:

It is contrary to history to represent work for reforms as a long-drawn-out revolution and revolution as a condensed series of reforms. A social transformation and a legislative reform do not differ according to their duration but according to their content. The secret of historic change through the utilization of political power resides precisely in the transformation of simple quantitative modification into a new quality, or to speak more concretely, in the passage of a historic period from one given form of society to another. That is why people who pronounce themselves in favour of the method of legislative reform in place and in contradistinction to the conquest of political power and social revolution, do not really choose a more tranquil, calmer and slower road to the same goal, but a different goal. Instead of taking a stand for the establishment of a new society they take a stand for surface modifications of the old society. If we follow the political conceptions of revisionism, we arrive at the same conclusion that is reached when we follow the economic theories of revisionism. Our program becomes not the realization of socialism, but the reform of capitalism; not the suppression of the wage labor system but the diminution of exploitation, that is, the suppression of the abuses of capitalism instead of suppression of capitalism itself.<sup>14</sup>

In making reforms the goal as opposed to revolution and separating Marxism from its revolutionary core, Bernstein also tried to distort Engel’s opinions to reinforce his own, but Rosa invalidated these efforts too. Bernstein sought such reinforcing opinions in the forewords to Marx’s book *Class Struggles in France* by Engels. What does Engels say in the foreword?

... Even in the classic time of street fighting, therefore, the barricade produced more of a moral than a material effect. It was a means of shaking the steadfastness of the military. If it held out until this was attained, victory was won; if not, the outcome was defeat. This is the main point which must be kept in view, also when examining the outlook for possible future street fighting.<sup>15</sup> In the Latin countries, too, it is being realized more and more that the old tactics must be revised. Everywhere the German example of utilizing the suffrage, of winning all posts accessible to us, has been imitated; everywhere the unprepared launching

---

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/ch05.htm>.

14 Rosa Luxemburg, “Conquest of Political Power”, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/ch08.htm>.

15 Karl Marx, *Fransız Üçlemesi*, tr. Erkin Özalp, İstanbul: Yordam Books, 2016, p. 29.

of an attack has been relegated to the background.<sup>16</sup>

The irony of world history turns everything upside down. We, the “revolutionaries”, the “overthrowers” — we are thriving far better on legal methods than on illegal methods and overthrow. The parties of order, as they call themselves, are perishing under the legal conditions created by themselves.<sup>17</sup>

What Engels defends in the foreword is nothing more than the basic approach to the opportunities afforded by legality and making full use of these. Bernstein completely separates what Engels said from its context and turns it into a maxim to hold indefinitely. Rosa Luxemburg states that what Engels had in mind when he made comparisons between legal political work, elections and the barricades was: “not the problem of taking power eventually, but today’s struggles; not the attitude of proletariat to the state in the moment of revolution but its attitude within the limits of capitalist state.”<sup>18</sup>

When Engels notes the possibilities afforded by positions held in the parliaments; Bernstein, just like when he turned the means-end relation upside down, tried to turn it into making parliament the goal and distorted Engel’s opinions in this direction. Engels emphasizes the possible gains to be made by legal struggles, but also clearly states that socialism cannot be achieved through a sequence of reforms: “And if we are not so crazy as to let ourselves be driven to street fighting in order to please them, then in the end there is nothing left for them to do but themselves break through this dire legality.”<sup>19</sup> That Engels considers street fighting crazy does not validate Bernstein’s opinions either. After saying how the new long and wide avenues and streets built after 1848 are so unfit for street fighting, Engel comments:

Does that mean that in the future street fighting will no longer play any role? Certainly not. It only means that the conditions since 1848 have become far more unfavorable for civilian fighters and far more favorable for the military. In the future, street fighting can, therefore, be victorious only if this disadvantageous situation is compensated by other factors. Accordingly, it will occur more seldom at the beginning of a great revolution than at its later stages and will have to be undertaken with greater forces. These, however, may then well prefer, as in the whole great French Revolution or on September 4 and October 31, 1870, in Paris, the open attack to passive barricade tactics.<sup>20</sup>

---

16 *ibid*, p. 31.

17 *ibid*, p. 33.

18 Rosa Luxemburg, “Conquest of Political Power”, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/ch08.htm>.

19 Marx, *ibid*, p. 33.

20 *ibid*, p. 30.

Alas, one cannot find these words of Engels in the foreword to the first few editions of *Class Struggles in France*. Such statements were to be removed by pressure from SPD leadership. SPD asked Engels to soften his radical revolutionary tone, allegedly due to the threat of new anti-socialist laws in Germany, and Engels opposed party managers' concerns to remain solely in the legality. Yet he still crossed out a few sections and the first few editions were published as such. Therefore, this text that Bernstein tried to use as a justification to his revisionism was one that was censored by SPD leadership for its revolutionary aspects. Engels later tried to publish this foreword in full, but this would only happen later in the Soviet Union.<sup>21</sup>

Bernstein's reformism was not an innovation that was brought about by the changing conditions, rather it was an attempt to separate Marxism from its revolutionary essence, and from its program of building a working-class state. Rosa Luxemburg made history among her peers through her relentless defense of Marxism and proletarian revolution against revisionism. Her article "Social Reform or Revolution" debunked Bernstein's theses. As a result of this debate, known as the revisionism debate in German social democracy, Rosa was chosen as the lead editor of *Saxon Workers' Paper (Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung)*. She was the first woman to ever hold such a post.<sup>22</sup>

Rosa Luxemburg won the debate against revisionism, but in reality, Bernstein was just saying what others in the party would not, he was not alone in his thoughts. These events were paving the way towards an SPD government that would strangle the revolution and murder Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

### **A revolutionary who argued with Lenin, but cannot be separated from him**

Rosa Luxemburg also argued against Lenin in certain subjects. Briefly, these can be summed up in four topics. The first is the national problem and a nation's right to self-determination. Despite coming from Poland, an oppressed nation, Rosa ironically tends to underestimate the importance of the national question

---

21 *ibid*, p. 15. This distortion of Engels' ideas was not limited to this censorship, efforts went on to portray him as someone defending peaceful transition to working class power no matter what. Some passages in the foreword were cherry-picked and published as such in SPD periodic *Vorwärts* to enforce this misconception. Against this, Engels insisted on publishing the full article, and yet the more comprehensive version published later still had to be edited by him.

22 Rosa Luxemburg has many other theoretic works and contributions. Since our subject is Rosa Luxemburg as a revolutionary, we won't get into these details. An example of her contributions is her theory of imperialism which has significantly different features than Lenin's. See Özgür Öztürk, "Rosa Luxemburg, Sermaye Birikimi ve Emperyalizm", *Devrimci Marksizm [Revolutionary Marxism]*, issue 20, Spring 2014 and Sungur Savran, *Kod Adı Küreselleşme: 21. Yüzyılda Emperyalizm*, 2nd edition, İstanbul: Yordam Books, p. 76-79, 316-330.

and at the same time, considering the level of integration of Poland with Russia, she claims it an economic impossibility for Poland to gain independence. Despite her claims, Poland became an independent state in 1914 and managed to survive economically.

The second topic is that of party and organization. While Lenin defends a disciplined organization, bound to a revolutionary program, Rosa criticizes this approach. Right after the Bolshevik-Menshevik split, in her article “Organizational Problems of Russian Social-Democracy” at *Iskra* analyzing this split, she wrote her criticisms of the organizational principles of Lenin as stated in *What Is To Be Done?*

Third, are the differences of opinion between Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin on war. Rosa, Lenin, and Liebknecht, in a period when social democrats stood by their bourgeoisie, were the voices of proletarian internationalism against the war. They fought to turn the imperialist war into a civil war. Therefore in this essential distinctive issue, they stood at the same place, however, they had their differences. For Lenin, due to the conditions of war, parallel to the discussions of the party, illegality is a way to preserve the revolutionary party of workers. Rosa Luxemburg paid the price of her disagreement by staying in a prison for most of the war. Lenin and Rosa agreed on founding a new International after the treason of II. International during the war, yet where Rosa saw the opportunity to work with centrists aligned with Kautsky, Lenin drew a line between them and sought to build a new International. Most importantly, as pointed out by Sungur Savran in the 25th issue of *Devrimci Marksizm*, discussing the war politics and the position of Marxists in this question, Rosa Luxemburg, unlike Liebknecht, opposed Lenin’s revolutionary defeatism.<sup>23</sup>

Fourth are the discussions around the October revolution. The contents of this were about the practice of the revolution, nations’ right to self-determination, constituent assembly, and democracy/dictatorship.

For us, Rosa was wrong in all of these points, but the main point we want to make is not the rightfulness of Lenin but rather point that they were always on the same side throughout these debates and considered each other as great revolutionaries. Missing this point and focusing merely on the discussions themselves is the way liberals operate in order to justify their positions.

Clara Zetkin, in *Reminiscences of Lenin*, quotes Rosa Luxemburg talking to her at the 1907 Stuttgart congress preparation meeting: “Take a good look at him. That is Lenin. Look at the self-willed, stubborn head. A real Russian peasant’s head with a few faintly Asiatic lines. That man will try to overturn mountains. Perhaps he will

---

23 Sungur Savran, “Savaş karşı savaş: Cihan Harbi’nde Lenin, Liebknecht, Luxemburg”, *Devrimci Marksizm [Revolutionary Marxism]*, issue 25, Winter 2015-2016, p. 64-66.

be crushed by them. But he will never yield.”<sup>24</sup> Against the efforts of the right wing of German SPD to obstruct Congress delegation of Rosa at the same congress, Lenin made her a delegate in the name of Russian social democracy, and thus supported his comrade’s fight against the backward elements of working-class movement. His famous words likening Rosa to an eagle was said after she was murdered:

Like a good old Russian fable: “Eagles may at times fly lower than hens, but hens can never rise to the height of eagles.” (...) But in spite of her mistakes she was—and remains for us—an eagle. And not only will Communists all over the world cherish her memory, but her biography and her *complete* works (the publication of which the German Communists are inordinately delaying, which can only be partly excused by the tremendous losses they are suffering in their severe struggle) will serve as useful manuals for training many generations of Communists all over the world.<sup>25</sup>

In the same place where he said these, Lenin was also listing Rosa’s mistakes and said that she was an eagle despite all of those. Rosa paid for her erroneous position in her polemics against Lenin with her life. She declared war against revisionism, she detected the hints of centrism even before Lenin but could not make the necessary political and organizational conclusions from these. She did not separate herself from the German SPD before too late. She did not grasp the importance of the Bolshevik party, Lenin’s theory of organization and could only start founding a new working class party after the failed revolution. Finally, when she was belatedly trying to fulfil those tasks, lacking the mechanisms to protect the leadership against counter-revolutionary forces, she was murdered, together with Liebknecht, by Friedrich Ebert and Gustav Noske who chose to enter the treasonous government that suppressed the revolution. After the October revolution, Rosa criticized the Leninist-Trotskyist concept of dictatorship for being undemocratic. She defended an immediate transition to a democratic state as the dictatorship of the working class. Just four months after making these points, she lost her life to the same forces that Lenin and Trotsky denied any political freedom in Russia.

Despite paying the heaviest price for her mistakes, she remained an eagle in Lenin’s eyes. Because they, together with Liebknecht, were on the same side when revolution met counter-revolution. This is why the German working

---

24 Clara Zetkin, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, 1924, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1924/reminiscences-of-lenin.htm>.

25 V.I. Lenin, “On Ascending A High Mountain; The Harm Of Despondency; The Utility Of Trade; Attitude Towards The Mensheviks, Etc.”, February 1922, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/feb/x01.htm> (Here Lenin refers to the fable “Eagle and cuckoo” by Ivan Andreyevich Krylov).

class embraced him as just like Liebknecht and Luxemburg when he died five years later on 21 January 1924. They commemorated the three great leaders as “3L” throughout that January. On 1935, Trotsky said, “our efforts for the Fourth International can be seen in the leadership of 3L.”<sup>26</sup> Their common ground was being the bravest, most unyielding representatives of working-class internationalism and revolutionary Marxism. Their common ground was being the leaders of 1917 October and 1918 November revolutions.

### **The greatest revolutionary woman in history!**

As with Karl Liebknecht’s maxim of “the enemy is within”, Rosa Luxemburg’s response to social democrats backing their own imperialist bourgeoisie is also embedded in our memories forever: “Then we need to change the ending of *Communist Manifesto* as such: workers of the world, unite during peacetime and fight during wars!” Why, then, was Liebknecht alone in parliament against war? Why is Liebknecht remembered as the champion against war, even though they both had the same position? In that period, women in Germany, and elsewhere, could not enter the parliament yet; they did not really have the right to elect and be elected, that is why. In such a moment, Rosa Luxemburg became one of the leaders of the international socialist movement. In a photograph of International Socialist Bureau, during the International Conference of Socialists in Stuttgart 1907, she was the only woman among so many men. Despite distancing herself from women’s liberation movements, she leads women in politics. She is the greatest revolutionary woman in history.

---

<sup>26</sup> Leon Trotsky, “Luxemburg and the Fourth International”, 1935, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1935/06/lux.htm>.