

Happy 150th Birthday, Rosa Luxemburg

BY

MARCELLO MUSTO

TRANSLATION BY

PATRICK CAMILLER

One hundred and fifty years ago today, the Polish Marxist thinker and organizer Rosa Luxemburg was born. She is, without question, one of the towering figures in the entire history of the socialist movement.

In August 1893, when the chair called on her to speak at a session of the Zurich Congress of the Second International, Rosa Luxemburg made her way without hesitation through the crowd of delegates and activists packed into the hall. She was one of the few women present, still in the flush of youth, slight of build, and with a hip deformity that had forced her to limp since the age of five. The first impression she gave to those who saw her was of a frail creature indeed. But then, standing on a chair to make herself better heard, she soon captivated the whole audience with the skill of her reasoning and the originality of her positions.

In her view, the central demand of the Polish workers' movement should not be an independent Polish state, as many had maintained. Poland was still under tripartite rule, divided between the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires; its reunification was proving difficult to achieve, and the workers should set their sights on objectives that would generate practical struggles in the name of particular needs.

In a line of argument that she would develop in the years to come, she attacked those who concentrated on national issues and warned that the rhetoric of patriotism would be used to play down class struggle and to push the social question into the background. There was no need to add "subjection to Polish nationality" to all the forms of oppression suffered by the proletariat, she argued.

Against the Current

The intervention at the Zurich Congress symbolized the whole intellectual biography of a woman who should be considered among the most significant exponents of twentieth-century socialism. Born a hundred fifty years ago, on March 5, 1871, in Zamość in Tsarist-occupied Poland, Rosa Luxemburg lived her whole life on the margins, grappling with multiple adversities and always swimming against the current. Of Jewish origin, suffering from a lifelong physical handicap, she moved to Germany at the age of twenty-seven and managed to obtain citizenship there through a marriage of convenience.

Being resolutely pacifist at the outbreak of the First World War, she was imprisoned several times for her ideas. She was a passionate enemy of imperialism during a new and violent period of colonial expansion. She fought against the death penalty in the midst of barbarism. And – a central dimension – she was a woman who lived in worlds inhabited almost exclusively by men.

She was often the only female presence, both at Zurich University, where she obtained a doctorate in 1897 with a thesis entitled *The Industrial Development of Poland*, and in the leadership of German Social Democracy. The party appointed her as the first woman to teach at its central cadre school — a task she performed in the years between 1907 and 1914, during which she published *The Accumulation of Capitalism* (1913) and worked on the uncompleted project *Introduction to Political Economy* (1925).

These difficulties were supplemented by her independent spirit and her autonomy — a virtue that often leads to trouble in left-wing parties too. Displaying a lively intelligence, she had the capacity to develop new ideas and to defend them, without awe and indeed with a disarming candor, before such figures as August Bebel and Karl Kautsky (who had had the formative privilege of direct contact with Engels).

Her aim was not to repeat Marx's words over again, but to interpret them historically and, when necessary, to build further on them. To voice her own opinion freely and to express critical positions within the party was for her an inalienable right. The party had to be a space where different views could coexist, so long as those who joined it shared its fundamental principles.

Party, Strike, Revolution

Luxemburg successfully overcame the many obstacles facing her, and in the fierce debate following Eduard Bernstein's reformist turn she became a well-known figure in the foremost organization of the European workers' movement. Whereas, in his famous text *The Preconditions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy* (1897–99), Bernstein had called on

the party to burn its bridges with the past and to turn itself into a merely gradualist force, Luxemburg insisted in *Social Reform or Revolution?* (1898–99) that during every historical period “work for reforms is carried on only in the direction given it by the impetus of the last revolution.”

Those who sought to achieve in the “chicken coop of bourgeois parliamentarism” the changes that the revolutionary conquest of political power would make possible were not choosing “a more tranquil, surer and slower road to the *same* goal,” but rather “a *different* goal.” They had accepted the bourgeois world and its ideology.

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The point was not to improve the existing social order, but to build a completely different one. The role of the labor unions — which could wrest from the bosses only more favorable conditions within the capitalist mode of production — and the Russian Revolution of 1905 prompted some thoughts on the possible subjects and actions that might bring about a radical transformation of society.

In the book *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Union* (1906), which analyzed the main events in vast areas of the Russian Empire, Luxemburg highlighted the key role of the broadest, mostly unorganized, layers of the proletariat. In her eyes, the masses were the true protagonists of history. In Russia the “element of spontaneity” — a concept that led some to accuse her of overestimating the class consciousness of the masses — had been important, and consequently the role of the party should not be to prepare the mass strike but to place itself “at the helm of the movement as a whole.”

For Luxemburg, the mass strike was “the living pulse-beat of the revolution” and, at the same time, “its most powerful driving wheel.” It was the true “mode of movement of the proletarian

mass, the phenomenal form of the proletarian struggle in the revolution.” It was not a single isolated action but the summation of a long period of class struggle.

Moreover, it could not be overlooked that “in the storm of the revolutionary period,” the proletariat was transformed in such a way that “even the highest good, life — not to speak of material well-being — ha[d] little value in comparison with the ideals of the struggle.” The workers gained in consciousness and maturity. The mass strikes in Russia had shown how, in such a period, the “ceaseless reciprocal action of the political and economic struggles” was such that the one could pass immediately into the other.

Communism Means Freedom and Democracy

On the question of organizational forms and, more specifically, the role of the party, Luxemburg was involved in another heated dispute during those years, this time with Lenin. In *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* (1904), the Bolshevik leader defended the positions adopted at the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, putting forward a conception of the party as a compact nucleus of professional revolutionaries, a vanguard whose task it was to lead the masses.

Luxemburg, by contrast, in *Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy* (1904), argued that an extremely centralized party set up a very dangerous dynamic of “blind obedience to the central authority.” The party should not stifle but develop the involvement of society, in order to achieve “the correct historical evaluation of forms of struggle.” Marx once wrote that “every step of the real movement is more important than dozens of programs.” And Luxemburg extended this into the claim that “errors made by a truly revolutionary labor movement are historically infinitely more fruitful and more valuable than the infallibility of the best of all possible central committees.”

This clash acquired still greater importance after the Soviet revolution of 1917, to which she offered her unconditional support. Worried by the events unfolding in Russia (beginning with the ways of tackling the land reform), she was the first in the communist camp to observe that “a prolonged state of emergency” would have a “degrading influence on society.”

In the posthumous text *The Russian Revolution* (1922 [1918]), she emphasized that the historical mission of the proletariat, in conquering political power, was “to create a socialist

democracy to replace bourgeois democracy — not to eliminate democracy altogether.” Communism meant “the most active, unlimited participation of the mass of the people, unlimited democracy,” which did not look to infallible leaders to guide it. A truly different political and social horizon would be reached only through a complex process of this kind, and not if the exercise of freedom was reserved “only for supporters of the government, only for the members of one party.”

Luxemburg was firmly convinced that “socialism, by its nature, cannot be bestowed from above”; it has to expand democracy, not diminish it. She wrote that “the negative, the tearing down, can be decreed; the positive, the building up, cannot.” That was “new territory,” and only “experience” would be “capable of correcting and opening new ways.” The Spartacist League, founded in 1914 after a break with the SPD and later to become the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), explicitly stated that it would never take over governmental power “except in response to the clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletarian mass of all of Germany.”

Though making opposite political choices, both Social Democrats and Bolsheviks wrongly conceived of democracy and revolution as two alternative processes. For Rosa Luxemburg, on the contrary, the core of her political theory was an indissoluble unity of the two. Her legacy has been squeezed on both sides: Social Democrats, complicit in her brutal murder at the age of forty-seven at the hands of right-wing paramilitaries, fought her over the years, with no holds barred for the revolutionary accents of her thought, while Stalinists steered clear of making her ideas better known because of their critical, free-spirited character.

Against Militarism, War, and Imperialism

The other pivotal point of Luxemburg’s political convictions and activism was her twin opposition to war and agitation against militarism. Here she proved capable of updating the theoretical approach of the Left and winning support for clear-sighted resolutions at congresses of the Second International, which, though disregarded, were a thorn in the side of supporters of the First World War.

In her analysis, the function of armies, the nonstop rearmament and the repeated outbreak of wars were not to be understood only in the classical terms of nineteenth-century political thinking. Rather, they were bound up with forces seeking to repress workers’ struggles and served as useful tools for reactionary interests to divide the working class. They also corresponded to a precise economic objective of the age.

Capitalism needed imperialism and war, even in peacetime, in order to increase production, as well as to capture new markets as soon as they presented themselves in the colonial periphery outside Europe. As she wrote in *The Accumulation of Capital*, “political violence is nothing but a vehicle for the economic process” — a judgment that she followed up with one of the most controversial theses in the book, that rearmament was indispensable to the productive expansion of capitalism.

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This picture was a long way from optimistic reformist scenarios, and to sum it up Luxemburg used a formula that would resonate widely in the twentieth century: “socialism or barbarism.” She explained that the second term could be avoided only through self-aware mass struggle and, since anti-militarism required a high level of political consciousness, she was one of the greatest champions of a general strike against war — a weapon that many others, including Marx, underestimated.

She argued that the theme of national defense should be used against new war scenarios and that the “War on War!” slogan should become “the cornerstone of working-class politics.” As she wrote in *The Crisis of Social Democracy* (1916), also known as *The Junius Pamphlet*, the Second International had imploded because it failed “to achieve a common tactic and action by the proletariat in all countries.” From then on, the “main goal” of the proletariat should therefore be “fighting imperialism and preventing wars, in peace as in war.”

Without Losing Her Tenderness

A cosmopolitan citizen of “what is to come,” Rosa Luxemburg said she felt at home “all over the world, wherever there are clouds and birds and human tears.” She was passionate about botany and loved animals, and we can see from her letters that she was a woman of great sensitivity, who remained at one with herself despite the bitter experiences that life held for her.

For the cofounder of the Spartacist League, the class struggle was not just a question of wage increases. She did not wish to be a mere epigone and her socialism was never economic. Immersed in the dramas of her time, she sought to modernize Marxism without calling its foundations into question. Her efforts in this direction are a constant warning to the Left that it should not limit its political activity to bland palliatives and give up trying to change the existing state of things.

The way in which she lived, and her success in wedding theoretical elaboration with social agitation, still stands as a beacon to the new generation of militants who have chosen to take up the many battles she waged.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcello Musto is the author of *Another Marx: Early Manuscripts to the International* (2018) and *The Last Years of Karl Marx: An Intellectual Biography* (2020). Among his edited books is *The Marx Revival: Key Concepts and New Interpretations* (2020). His writings are available [here](#).

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Patrick Camiller has a degree in philosophy from King's College and works as a translator into English from a number of European languages.

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