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Reviews

Revisiting Rosa Luxemburg's Writings on the 1905 Russian Revolution

- Reviews section -

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The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg Volume IV, Political Writings 2: On Revolution (1906–1909) by Peter Hudis and Sandra Rein (eds.) London: Verso, 2022.

The newest addition of the planned seventeen volumes of the writing of Rosa Luxemburg, including thousands of pages that have only recently been identified and have never been available in English, is a critical contribution to our understanding of her life and work. Considering that an estimated 80 percent of her writings have never been published in English, this immense lifetime project—launched by Peter Hudis in 2007 [\[1\]](#)—should be celebrated. The newest volume on revolution is one that includes many insights into Luxemburg's thinking about the 1905 Russian Revolution and its relationship to the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and labor movement politics as well as her thinking about mass strikes, revolution, reform, and the roles of parties and unions in the revolutionary struggle.

I advise against the temptation to skip the introduction and proceed to other selections in the volume. Editors Peter Hudis and Sandra Rein provide critical insight into Luxemburg's political projects, activities, and then-newly developing theory of revolutionary struggle between 1902 and 1909, with an emphasis on 1906 which composes about half the book. This is intentional. because, as they explain, Luxemburg was engaged in party building in Germany as a leader of the militant wing of the SPD, as well as the formation of the revolutionary Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland (later the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania in exile) and her solidarity work with the Russian Revolution.

This context is vital for understanding how she came to theorize about the role of revolutionary leadership in fomenting the mass strike, the function of unions to manage and control them, and the self-organization of the working class and its ability to circulate the struggle across the boundaries of industrial sectors, language, ethnicity, job classification, and national borders. I have read "The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions" several times before but reading this new translation (after reading the introduction) provided the missing historical foundation.

Because it is available in the still widely read Pathfinder Press Collected Works edition and is available online, "The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions" is perhaps her best known and widely-read work available in English. [\[2\]](#) But while that translation trods along, this new translation by Nicholas Gray sings. Her turns of phrase and the color of her writing come through in this translation so vividly even for the most knowledgeable reader that it is worth rereading for that alone. Whatever might have been lost in previous translations appears here to illustrate the vigor with which Luxemburg was writing from the first prospect of a revolutionary wave of struggle that could neither be called into existence nor suppressed by dictates of any party or union. Foreshadowing the Mexican Revolution that would begin a few years later, the prospect of overthrowing capitalism by self-organized class struggle now appeared near-immediately achievable. Reading this new translation, even if one is familiar with the earlier version, will deliver delicious rewards for the effort.

These new texts also help us to understand how Luxemburg came to the idea of the mass strike after exploring the differences between the political and economic strike in her earlier writings. Luxemburg was struggling to understand how class struggle can extract concessions from the ruling class, such as "bourgeois" rights of speech, assembly, and protest, which are a precondition for revolutionary struggle but not ends in themselves. What comes out vividly in these selected passages is her attempt to struggle with the two questions of whether it was necessary to pass through bourgeois democracy and capitalism first before transitioning to socialism and whether the political struggle must proceed the economic struggle. It is apparent that Luxemburg is struggling mightily with these accepted notions within the European left and whether the 1905 Russian Revolution provides sufficient evidence to repudiate them.

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During this period Luxemburg wavers and had not yet fully embraced one or the other. That would come at the end of her life when she and Karl Liebknecht supported the arm attempt to spark revolutionary struggle. This tragically brought about her demise when her former Social Democratic allies have the Freikorps assassinate her. In 1905-7 she sees political and economic mass struggles as distinct yet interwoven with one another, even going as far as to say neither must precede the other but that they must happen together. It is this germ of an idea that will ultimately settle the question for her whether a revolutionary elite must first seize the state on behalf of the working class, the core premise of Leninism that she will move away from in later years.

Luxemburg is emboldened by the seeming economic struggles which carry with them the possibility of political reform that opens up the space for further expanding the economic struggle into revolutionary directions. In the many strikes she recounts in "The Mass Strike" it becomes clear that what is most promising about them is not that their demands were won in the short term only to be wretched away soon after, but that the workers combined the demand for less work and more pay through disruptive self-organization on the shop floor and their capacity to spread the struggle across entire regions and national borders within days. For Rosa, the role of the revolutionary is not to delude themselves into thinking they can call this sort of activity into being but to always be ready to intervene when the working class launches the struggle in order to support and amplify what the workers are doing themselves.

Many of the volume's other selections, such as "Critique of the Workers Movement," "Why Does the Revolution Not Break Out," and "The General Strike and German Social Democracy," do not provide the kind of detailed analysis offered by "The Mass Strike," but—at last in English—document how Luxemburg's ideas germinated and matured until they reached a theoretical threshold. What this volume illustrates in great detail, is that she did not do this in the abstract, merely as a theoretician, but in the heat of struggle as she intervened to situate the importance of the 1905 Russian Revolution to the workers' movement elsewhere in Europe, especially in Germany and Poland.

Although in the end Luxemburg miscalculated and supported the Spartacist uprising in Berlin in 1919, which led to her assassination, her writings on revolution during these four years help us understand how she both saw the interrelationship between the class struggle and the struggle for political freedom. They trace her early steps to rejecting both reformist social-democratic and vanguardist top-down parties such as the Bolsheviks as well as union disciplining of rank-and-file workers in favor of self-organized workers' struggles. By 1909 these the fissures were beginning to show and would only grow over time. Despite Luxemburg's unproductive hostility towards anarchists, which the editors remind the reader is factually misrepresented, her specific theory of revolution taking form at this time is the result of observing, engaging with, and reflecting on the working class acting for itself.

This volume of The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg is not a book you will read from cover to cover, but keep as a resource to turn to as the fire of class struggle swirls all around us. It can then provide a serene source for making sense of it all and what might come next to move the struggle into revolution.

Source: [New Politics](#).

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[1] Verso blog, Rosa Luxemburg, "[Work in Progress: Interview with Peter Hudis](#)," March 4, 2021.

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[2] Mary-Alice Waters (ed.), Rosa Luxemburg Speaks, [Pathfinder](#), 1970, pp. 153-218.