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Book review

# Rosa Luxemburg: in the storm of struggle

- Reviews section -

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**The letters of Rosa Luxemburg** is the first instalment of a valuable ongoing endeavor to publish all her collected works in English; it makes available a wealth of letters, including many that were not previously available in English.

The letters on their own do not provide a complete account of Luxemburg's life and politics. Many of the most personal were clearly never intended to be made public, and this window into Luxemburg's inner world has led some reviewers to make outlandish claims about her relationships and motivations. The picture is distorted because Luxemburg was most prolific when sedentary—during periods of political reaction and of course during the enforced isolation and inactivity of her many years in prison. Luxemburg's most important achievements—her involvement in the “hurly-burly” of the socialist movement, as she puts it, and the periods of intense creativity when she developed her most lasting theoretical contributions—appear “off stage.” This partly explains why Margaretha von Trotta's heartbreaking film, *Rosa Luxemburg*, which draws heavily on the letters, portrays a contemplative, lonely, sensitive woman with a tendency towards depression, whose bleak life culminates in tragedy.

When imprisoned, and facing counter-revolutionary violence, Luxemburg was sometimes lonely, isolated, and despairing. But her public speeches, articles, and books—and accounts from her contemporaries—suggest that the tremendous revolutionary energy and resilience displayed in many of the other letters were more definitive characteristics. Read alongside the biographies and, more importantly, Luxemburg's own publications, the Letters provide invaluable insights into the personal development of this great revolutionary. [\[1\]](#)

There are no letters from Luxemburg's early life in Poland. The first are from 1891, after she had fled political persecution and found refuge in Switzerland. This is where she met Leo Jogiches, also young and newly exiled; the two became comrades in the burgeoning international socialist movement, and for many years were also lovers. The letters to Jogiches from this period switch channels with dizzying frequency—jumping from discussions of a strike of garment workers, to strategizing about *Sprawa Robotnicz*, [\[2\]](#) to the most mundane details of domestic and financial arrangements.

Ironically those letters most obviously not meant for public consumption—intimate letters to a lover—are of particular fascination to some reviewers. I will come back to this, but let me note that the attempt to establish a definitive picture of the relationship between Luxemburg and Jogiches is perilous: We only have Luxemburg's side of the correspondence; even at their most frequent there are long gaps between letters, including during periods when they were together. It is apparent that theirs was a stormy relationship with intense highs and lows (Jogiches famously threatened to kill Luxemburg when she started an affair with someone else, and showed up with a gun.) However, their intellectual and political alliance continued to the end of their lives, by which time, as one of Luxemburg's biographers puts it, “there was no longer a trace of discord between them.” [\[3\]](#) In Luxemburg's last letter she worries that Jogiches had been arrested; Jogiches spent his final days before his own arrest and murder securing Luxemburg's papers.

But to return to the nineteenth century: having received her doctorate from Zurich University in 1897 and established herself within the international Marxist community, Luxemburg left Switzerland, and Jogiches, for Berlin, to work with the biggest and most advanced party in the Second International, the SPD. [\[4\]](#)

The early German letters underscore the challenges of this relocation, particularly for one who was an outsider to mainstream German society on so many fronts: a Pole, a Jew, a young woman, physically small and with a limp, and a socialist to boot. In May 1899 she describes herself as a “person who does not belong to an in-group, who has no

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one's protection, but only the use of her own elbows" (116). But she also shows immense determination and courage, and a commitment to the socialist project that outweighed all personal discomfort.

Her irrepressible and irreverent sense of humor clearly helped. She describes an early interview with an important party official, Ignatz Auer. After Luxemburg gave him an account of the state of Polish socialism, she writes: *[T]he fellow tried, with his deep bass voice, to expostulate, just as Bebel [5] would have at that point, "that's wrong,"* actually things were going quite well he said, and rattled on in this vein for several minutes. I heard him out like a well-brought up person, and when he had finished I explained to him calmly: "You have told me nothing **new**. I am much better informed on this question than you are, because I have direct relations with comrades in Poznan, Breslau, etc. and also here in Berlin." (50)

Either as a kind of test, or because they weren't sure what else to do with her, the party leaders declared that she should go to the remote region of Upper Silesia, to do electoral agitation among the Polish workers. This was not an attractive prospect: long and difficult journeys, uncertain accommodation, and looming state repression. In a typically understated comment to some friends, she reflects: "It's a difficult bit of work; public meetings are not allowed there, and the police can come down on us at any moment." (62)

But she cheerfully took up the challenge. She reasoned:

*Not to go to Upper Silesia now would...mean to spoil relations with the SPD Executive, to appear before them as a hero of empty words.... If I have the intention... of presenting an independent point of view on the Polish work, I must establish direct connections with Upper Silesia.... In short, there is nothing left but to pack my suitcase and go.* (57)

As it turned out, she was in her element agitating among these economically and politically oppressed workers and peasants, and gained valuable "personal acquaintance with the most important Upper Silesian worker-agitators." (71)

At this time Luxemburg realized her considerable talent as a public speaker. Her own description in a letter to Jogiches from 1899 (unfortunately not included in this collection) gives you a glimpse of her powers of oratory:

*In my "soul," a totally new, original form is ripening that ignores all rules and conventions. It breaks them by the power of ideas and strong conviction. I want to affect people like a clap of thunder, to inflame their minds not by speechifying but with the breadth of my vision, the strength of my conviction, and the power of my expression.* [6]

This approach to public speakingâ€”breaking down tired conventions of all kindsâ€”reflected her broader role in the organization. She wrote, the same year:

*I have no intention whatever of limiting myself to **criticism**. On the contrary, I have the intention and the desire to **push in a positive direction**, and not just to push individuals but the movement as a whole, to bring our entire positive effort under review, to demonstrate new ways of doing agitation and practical work...to fight against casualness, routinism, etc. In a word, to be constantly giving new impetus to the movement....*

The entire current epoch is an extraordinarily crucial one. And...there is no one present who is in a position to wake up the party by tapping on its skull... (117)

And she brought this same spirit to the written word, as she increasingly contributed to a range of socialist papers and journals. This in itself was a considerable feat â€” the letters are full of comments about the difficulty of acquiring current foreign news and sources. She and her comrades wrote to each other daily, exchanging hard copies of drafts, lending books and pamphlets, returning edited copies by the next post.

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The letters provide insight into her ongoing battle with the party leadership, as bureaucratic conservatism developed into full-blown reformism. In October 1898 she wrote to August Bebel of Eduard Bernstein, the eminent spokesperson for reformism:

*That Bernstein...no longer bases himself on our program was of course clear to me.... It surprises me, though, that you and Comrade Kautsky, since you have grasped the state of affairs **in precisely this way**, did not want to use the favorable mood that was created by the party congress for an immediate and energetic debate, but before all else, you made an arrangement that Bernstein would bring out a pamphlet, or booklet...which had the effect of delaying the discussion. (89)*

Luxemburg strategized about her response—which was to culminate in a series of articles that was later to become *Reform or Revolution*—in her letters to Jogiches:

*When Bernstein brings out his book, that is the time when as much as possible we must wring its neck, and whatever was said **previously** disappears completely from the scene, that is why K.K. (Karl Kautsky) too will step forward and speak out after the appearance of Ede's (Bernstein) booklet—K.K., who, as you know, always understands how to speak after another has spoken, but with words that are a little bit different..., so that the public thinks he is the first one to present this standpoint. (97)*

Such comments, again revealing her wickedly sharp sense of humor, demonstrate her awareness of Kautsky's limitations a decade before their public breakup.

Throughout her life Luxemburg remained in touch with the workers' movement: letters describe tours in Upper Silesia, Poznan, Chemnitz; she gave talks at events ranging from an impromptu circle of a few dozen at a railway station, to an outdoor meeting of thousands in a decorated garden. As she established her credentials as a principled revolutionary, she came under attack from the bourgeois press and the state. In 1904 she was given a prison sentence for "insulting the Prussian monarch" in a campaign speech.

As she was to do in many future prison sentences, she spent her time reading economics, literature, and philosophy, and sharpening her political analysis. In her correspondence with the Dutch socialist Henriette Roland Holst, Luxemburg expressed her growing understanding of internationalism as a central principle of socialism: "I do see the strengthening of international feeling to be, in and of itself, a means of fighting against bigotry and ignorance, on which such a godly part of opportunism rests." (179)

She also sought to understand the development of opportunism within the SPD and to develop an antidote:

*[F]or a revolutionary movement not to go forward means—to fall back. The only means of fighting opportunism in a radical way is to keep going forward oneself, to **develop** tactics further, to intensify the revolutionary aspects of the movement. Generally speaking, opportunism is a plant that grows in swamps, spreading quickly and luxuriantly in the stagnant water of the movement; when the current flows swiftly and strong it (opportunism) dies away by itself. (183)*

The letters of this period acknowledge that "only the smallest number of us are aware" of the weight of opportunism, while registering a fundamental problem with the social democratic model of a mass party that will "spontaneously" become revolutionary.

The outbreak of revolution in Russia in 1905—the great dress rehearsal for 1917—confirmed Luxemburg's emphasis on the revolutionary potential of the working class masses. Released from prison, she threw herself into a

whirl of activity, explaining to Henriette Roland Holst:

*I cannot now leave my post, but I feel splendid in doing this work, because the revolution (in Russia is developing according to all the rules, and it is a great joy to be able to observe this, understand it and contribute to it.... People like us take an active part with good cheer.... Among the masses in our country a truly voracious appetite has developed for light, for class consciousness, and I count myself lucky that I can contribute at least a small kernel toward appeasing this hunger for enlightenment.*(186-7)

She made a perilous border crossing, traveling incognito in a train full of counterrevolutionary soldiers, or as she put it, "under military escort" (219), in order to join her Polish comrades. Once there, she saw first hand the phases of working class revolution: the general mass strikes, armed uprisings, factory occupations and the development of worker councils. Luxemburg saw clearly the limitations of "spontaneous" uprising, and emphasized the crucial role of an organized vanguard of revolutionary workers. This is reflected in her descriptions of her daily work—printing leaflets, holding factory meetings, struggling to maintain publication of a daily revolutionary newspaper.

The experience of being in a revolution was obviously life altering. She captured the atmosphere in a letter to the Kautskys in February 1906:

*[A] silent heroism and a feeling of class solidarity among the masses is developing which I would like to show... to the dear Germans. Everywhere the workers are making certain arrangements **on their own initiative** so that, for example, the employed workers regularly take up a weekly collection for the unemployed.... In fact the feeling of solidarity and even of brotherhood with the **Russian** workers has developed so strongly that one is involuntarily amazed, even though we ourselves have worked toward that goal.... [I]n all the factories "on their own initiative" committees have been formed by the workers that make decisions about all conditions of work, the hiring and firing of workers etc. The employer has literally ceased to be "master in his own home." (228)*

She is referring here to the soviets that were to become the lynchpin of socialist revolution but as yet did not even have a name.

By March of 1906, however, the revolution was already on its way to defeat, and Luxemburg, along with Jogiches and countless other leaders, was arrested. She wrote to the Kautskys with her usual ironic good cheer:

*[T]hat's the way it goes. Hopefully, you won't take the matter too much to heart. Long live the Re...! (i.e., the Revolution) and everything that comes with it. To a certain extent, so to speak, I would much rather be sitting here than...debating with PÄ«us. (PÄ«us was on the other side of the debate in the SPD over the relationship of the Trade Unions and the party.) (229)*

For all her bravado, the time in prison was grueling, but relatively brief: she was freed, with the help of organized pressure from both German and Polish socialist parties, after a few months.

She went then, incognito, to Finland, where she sojourned with Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders. She refers to her time with "Russian friends," and confides to Franz Mehring, "I have gotten so used to the revolutionary milieu here that it makes me anxious when I think of myself back on the quiet and peaceful German treadmill" (236). There are, unfortunately, few letters from this period, when she was working on *The Mass Strike*, and drawing out the lessons of the revolution.

These experiences sharpened her sense of the limitations of the German party. The leadership, she wrote in a letter

to Clara Zetkin, have “given themselves over to parliamentarism,” while *the masses, and still more the great mass of (party) comrades*, in their heart of hearts have had their fill of parliamentarism.... **Our** task now is simply to counteract these authorities, who have become all rusted over, with protests that will be as rough and brusque as possible. (237)

While earlier, after the 1903 Split between the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions in Russia, Luxemburg had followed the leadership of the SPD in condemning the Bolsheviks, in 1907 when she attended the Russian Congress she was now harshly critical of the Mensheviks, and refers to the Bolsheviks as “having a sense of principled politics” (242). She embarked on a speaking tour about the revolution and the role of the mass strike, which drew enthusiastic large crowds, but earned her another prison sentence, for “incitement to acts of violence,” which she served in the summer of 1907.

During the period of reaction following the defeat of the revolution, Luxemburg taught at the party school, and developed her analysis of imperialism and war as integral to capitalism, culminating in *The Accumulation of Capital*. The letters from this period are mostly addressed to Kostya Zetkin (the son of her great friend and comrade Clara), with whom she had an affair. Between her expressions of love and affection Luxemburg sends reading lists and shipments of books, and constantly tries to broaden Kostya’s political education: “History is the most interesting thing there is, and I have the secret hope that even if you scorn economics you will find your own field in history, and through it, and for its sake, you will also finally grasp and appreciate economics.” (257)

With the revival of working class struggle in 1910 Luxemburg embarked on a speaking tour advocating for the mass strike. She wrote to friends Mathilde and Robert Seidel:

*During all of April, I roared through Germany with rallies and public meetings on the electoral issue. Now I am romping around in the press...and always in between those things, there was the Russian and Polish work. So there’s always enough to do. But I am personally satisfied because, after all, I enjoy life most in the midst of the storm.* (291)

By 1912 she was writing, “We are coming closer and closer to a time when the masses, the ranks of the party, will need an energetic and ruthlessly determined leadership on the grand scale...the masses stand behind us and want to have a different leadership” (322). And yet, as we know, the revolutionaries did not develop an alternative, independent leadership. The letters surrounding the outbreak of World War I illustrate the devastating consequences of this. [Z] The dissenters—Luxemburg, Franz Mehring, Clara Zetkin, Karl Liebknecht—had no way to consolidate a broader base. She wrote to Carl Moor, a Swiss ally:

*(W)e feel ourselves to be cut off from the world, blocked off, in fact, by a double wall: the state of siege [martial law had been declared] and the party officialdom.... [L]et it be said only that it would be a great error to think that the official behavior of the SPD Reichstag group, the SPD executive and the party editors express the thoughts and feelings of the whole party! On the contrary...it is precisely the opponents of the official party tactics whose mouths are gagged, and the political life of the masses is completely suppressed .... [U]nfortunately all the central institutions of the party... are dominated by opportunist elements, and the whole opposition has been broken to pieces, because the masses cannot protest and in large part they have been scattered to the various battlefields.*(332-5)

While the party machine refused to publish the antiwar radicals, the state arrested them or sent them to the battlefields. Luxemburg was to spend most of the war in increasingly grim prisons.

Her letters from prison are both humbling and inspiring. She was facing the horror of World War I—the organized slaughter of a whole generation of workers, including many of her closest friends—and the massive betrayal of the

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International. She occupied herself with writing and reading, and with her correspondence with friends and comrades. But she also drew comfort and pleasure wherever she could find them: in tending a small garden that she was able to grow for a time, or feeding birds that she trained to come to the window of her cell, or even, at one point, in studying a swarm of wasps. And through it all she continued her political writing, including the brilliant antiwar pamphlet, *The Crisis of Social Democracy* [8] even though all political correspondence was prohibited, and her writings had to be smuggled out at great risk.

At times bad health and low spirits threatened to overwhelm her usual equanimity and resourcefulness, especially after the move to a prison in Breslau that deprived her of the “relative freedom of movement” and access to a garden. (429) But as the broader political climate brightened, so did her spirits: She wrote to Zetkin in April 1917, after the first phase of the Russian revolution that toppled the Tsar:

*The news from Russia and the coming of spring also tend to make a person feel fresh and lively. The Russian events have immense, incalculable implications, and I regard what has happened there so far as only a small overture. Things there are bound to develop into something colossal.* (390)

And in May, to Martha Rosenbaum:

*[T]he wonderful events in Russia are also having a good effect on me, like a life-giving elixir, for all of us, what's coming from there is a message of healing...it is our own cause that is winning there. It must and will have a redeeming impact on the whole world, it must radiate out to all of Europe.*(406)

In November 1917, after the October Revolution in Russia that brought the Bolshevik-led soviets to power, she wrote to her friend and comrade Clara Zetkin of Lenin and the Bolsheviks: “Their attempt, by itself, stands as a deed of world-historical significance and a genuine milestone”; (447) and to Luise Kautsky: “It is a world historical deed, the traces of which will not have disappeared eons from now.” (452)

After waiting for so long, Luxemburg was finally freed by the outbreak of revolution in Germany in November, 1918. She immediately threw herself into the task of building the KPD, the Communist Party of Germany, which was founded in December. [9] The final letter in the collection is to Clara Zetkin, written January 11, and it captures the frenetic political climate, and the challenges of building the party in the midst of the storm:

*It is impossible to describe the way of life that Iâ€”and all of usâ€”have been living for weeks, the tumult and turmoil, the constant changing of living quarters, the never-ending reports filled with alarm, and in between, the tense strain of work, conferences, etc. etc.* (490)

She writes of the new organization: “For the most part a fresh new generation, free of the stupefying traditions of the â€”grand old party, tried and true”â€”and that must be viewed in both its aspects, of light and shade” (491). And she expresses a positive assessment of their achievements and prospects: “On the whole our movement is developing splendidly, and throughout all of Germany at that.” (492)

On the same day, January 11, Luxemburg wrote in *Die Rote Fahne* [10]:

*The absence of leadership, the non-existence of a centre to organize the Berlin working class, cannot continue. If the cause of the Revolution is to advance, if the victory of the proletariat, of socialism, is to be anything but a dream, the revolutionary workers must set up leading organizations able to guide and to utilize the combative energy of the masses.* [11]

Just days later, in the wake of the brutal repression of a worker uprising in Berlin, the counterrevolutionary Free Corps—under the jurisdiction of the SPD government—arrested, tortured, and murdered Luxemburg, and her close comrade Karl Liebknecht. While the fate of the German revolution was not settled—the struggle continued for four more years—the loss of two such important leaders was a great setback.

With the knowledge of this history, the abrupt end of the *Letters* is devastating. As I came to the final page, I recalled Luxemburg's own words on the death of her beloved friend Hans Diefenbach in the war: "It is like a word cut short in mid-sentence, like a musical chord broken off, although I still keep hearing it." (441)

Publishing, reading, engaging with, and writing about Luxemburg's life and works help us to keep hearing her voice. For this reason the *Letters* have drawn welcome attention, including positive reviews in venues not habitually given to serious discussions of revolutionary Marxism, such as the *Guardian*, the *London Review of Books*, *The Atlantic*, and more.

But some of these reviews present a version of Luxemburg that would have been anathema to her: She was exceptional, we are told, because she was both a revolutionary Marxist and a sensitive and independent individual who embraced all that life has to offer; more specifically, she is the antithesis of that other revolutionary, Lenin. These are not fresh insights gleaned from the newly available materials, but old myths drawn from the extant reservoir of disinformation about Lenin, what Lars Lih, discussing Lenin's *What is to be Done*, calls the "textbook interpretation," the "wide and long-standing consensus" that is unsubstantiated yet reinforced by repetition: that Lenin was anti-Democratic, totalitarian, paved the way for Stalinism, and was joyless, domineering, and compulsive. [12]

Christopher Hitchens' review notes Luxemburg's "deep contrast with Lenin, who famously distrusted his emotions and tried his best to silence the appeals of nature and art." [13] Hitchens does not need to provide any sources, as he can draw on established cliché, in this case "the legend that [Lenin] 'gave up Beethoven' in order to remain a 'hard' and unrelenting revolutionary." [14]

As has been argued elsewhere, this is a groundless caricature of Lenin. It disregards copious evidence—available in primary sources from individuals who actually knew him—that Lenin in fact appreciated nature and music and had "his hesitations and doubts, his anxieties and warm emotions" as much as anyone. [15]

Equally, the false opposition between Lenin and Luxemburg, in ignoring all they shared, produces a caricatured Luxemburg: where Lenin is hard, intellectual, and singular; Luxemburg is soft, emotional, and complex. There is a long history of such stereotyping: from Bertram Wolfe, who described Luxemburg's "longing to conquer in storm and passion," her "slight and weak" body and "large, expressive...beautiful eyes" [16] to Jonathan Rabb, whose novel *Rosa* searches for the poetic soul buried beneath "the woman who shouted down to the crowds," and imagines that Leo Jogiches, "recognized in Rosa something more vital than his own cold conviction." [17]

The sexist assumption—that Luxemburg was essentially different from the male socialists of her era, that men can devote themselves to a political cause, but women can't—can be seen both in the vitriol hurled at Luxemburg by hostile contemporaries and in ostensibly friendly retrospective studies.

These assumptions also show up in unexpected places, such as a review of the *Letters* by Jacqueline Rose. [18] The review explicitly interrogates the formulaic division between Luxemburg's "political and private lives" and rejects the commonplace idea that "the correspondence reveals the human being, the woman, behind the steely revolutionary." Rose instead appreciates the "profound intermeshing" of the public and private in Luxemburg's writing. But she nonetheless reinstates the standard oppositions when she defines Luxemburg in terms of her dissimilarity to Leo Jogiches, and in extension, to Lenin.

This is where those early letters to Jogiches come into play. Rose represents Jogiches as manipulative, heartless, soulless, and everything that Luxemburg was not. Luxemburg “elevated uncertainty to a principle, a revolutionary creed” while Jogiches, “lived for the cause, a cause [Luxemburg] reproaches for destroying all that is finest in a human being.”

It is hard to fathom how anyone familiar with Luxemburg’s life and work can reach this conclusion. Luxemburg was a brilliant dialectician, alert to nuance and contradiction. But she never wavered from the guiding certainties of Marxism, particularly the superior explanatory power of historical materialism and the revolutionary potential of the working class. This was the basis for her argument with Bernstein and the bureaucracy of the SPD. Unlike them, Luxemburg was grounded by her activism in the workers’ movement, and she was quick to recognize the self-serving political compromises of those who became too cozy with the establishment. Her opponents in the bourgeois press and the Reichstag were infuriated by her relentless intellectual power and dogged refusal to bow to authority or back down from a fight—“not by her “uncertainty.”

Rose even repeats the idea that Jogiches thwarted Luxemburg’s desire to settle down to an ordinary domestic life with him. This is largely based on an 1899 letter where Luxemburg wonders if she will ever have a child, and imagines a cozy domestic future: “We will hide away from the world, the two of us, in two little rooms, we will work hard, we will cook, and it will be so good, so good.” (115)

When considering the entirety of her life and work it is obvious that the obstacles to an “ordinary life” were far greater than Jogiches. They faced very real social barriers including moral strictures against non-marital cohabitation, and material restrictions on freedom of movement across national boundaries. Luxemburg had entered into an arranged marriage with a German in order to get citizenship rights, and the personal correspondence addresses the relentless ongoing challenge of securing immigration papers for Jogiches. But more importantly, Luxemburg’s sentiment itself cannot be taken at face value. Elsewhere she comments that she would have preferred a quiet life tending geese rather than one of revolutionary struggle, but to my knowledge no one has accused Jogiches of standing in the way of this ambition.

Always behind Jogiches is the figure of Lenin. Rose asks, in reference to one letter where Luxemburg forcefully challenges Jogiches: “How can we not see in this struggle a rehearsal, or the grounds, of her later critique of Leninism?” Both Rose and Hitchens give the impression that Lenin and Luxemburg represent diametrically opposed traditions.

There are some factual errors along the way. The term “Leninism” was not coined until after Luxemburg’s death, and neither she nor Lenin would have thought in terms of a distinct doctrine around the individual. Rose claims that Luxemburg was “admonishing Lenin” when she observed in *The Mass Strike* that “revolutions do not allow anyone to play the schoolmaster with them.” In fact Luxemburg was addressing the right wing of the SPD and the trade union bureaucracy. Rose also repeats the claim that Lenin wanted Luxemburg’s *Russian Revolution* burned, which as Peter Hudis points out in an online response to the review, is a myth: Lenin never said such a thing, and on the contrary advocated publishing her complete works.

But on a much more fundamental level it is a travesty to portray Luxemburg as Lenin’s antithesis. In the letters Luxemburg makes both negative and positive comments about Lenin: the most critical during the low point of their political relationship in 1913; the most positive in November 1917. Throughout their lives they often disagreed; on particular issues, most notably the national question, they did so consistently and fiercely. But they were on the same side of many more battles.

Routinely we hear of Luxemburg’s criticisms of the Bolsheviks, but not her far more substantive criticisms of the Mensheviks, and of the reformists within the SPD. Rose and Hitchens and others cite Luxemburg’s harsh criticism of

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the Bolsheviks during and after October 1917, but without acknowledging her overarching support for their achievement, as cited above. Nor do they discuss her leadership of the illegal Polish party, or the fact that she dedicated the last months of her life to building a revolutionary party akin to the Bolsheviks.

Finally Rose's claim that "Jogiches lived for the cause, a cause [Luxemburg] reproaches for destroying all that is finest in a human being" is not only inaccurate (nowhere in the letters does she make such a charge), but in complete opposition to Luxemburg's own words and deeds. Not only in her writing but in her life and death she committed herself to "the cause," precisely because she valued "all that is finest in a human being" and saw and resisted all the ways that capitalism, imperialism, war, poverty, and oppression restrain and distort human potential: as she puts it in *The Mass Strike*, revolutionary struggle allows workers to "overcome the levigation and the decay to which they are condemned under the daily yoke of capitalism." [19]

Repeatedly in the letters she professes her desire to be in the midst of the struggle, employing some of her more memorable metaphors to emphasize the point. My personal favorite: "I am ready at my post at all times and at the first opportunity will begin striking the keys of World History's piano with all ten fingers so that it will really boom." (392)

Luxemburg and Lenin were two principal leaders at a time when world socialist revolution was a closer possibility than at any other time. Lenin and the Bolsheviks have been subjected to a century of demonization precisely because they led the one successful socialist revolution. The defeat of the German revolution signaled the failure of that revolution to spread, the reversal of the achievements in Russia, and the ascendancy of Stalinism.

Luxemburg, like countless other brave men and women of that revolutionary era, most of whom left no trace, dedicated her life to a cause that for a brief time opened up the promise of an entirely different world. As we face our own era of crisis and revolt, we would do well to follow Luxemburg's advice: "Our task now is simply to counteract these authorities, who have become all rusted over, with protests that will be as rough and brusque as possible."

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[1] The best single biography is Paul Frölich's *Rosa Luxemburg: Ideas in Action*, translated by Joanna Hoornweg (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010).

[2] Workers' Cause, the publication of the Polish socialist party Luxemburg and Jogiches helped establish, and led mostly from exile throughout their lives

[3] J.P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg Volume II* (London: Oxford UP, 1966), 779.

[4] The Social Democratic Party of Germany. At this time "social democracy" was synonymous with "socialism." All member organizations of the Second International—the successor to the "First International" set up by Marx and Engels—aspired to the model of the SPD.

[5] August Bebel was a leading member of the International as well as the SPD, and member of the German parliament, the Reichstag

[6] Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson, eds., *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 382.

[7] The SPD, along with most of the Second International, abandoned working class internationalism to support their respective nations' war efforts. This was a direct betrayal of the principled antiwar position expressed in a resolution, crafted by Luxemburg and Lenin and passed at the

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1907 Stuttgart Conference of the International: "If the outbreak of wars threatens, it is the duty of the workers and their parliamentary representatives in the countries involved, with the aid of the International bureau, to exert all their efforts to prevent the war by means of coordinated action." Quoted in Scott, *Essential Rosa Luxemburg* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2008), 19.

[8] [ Also known as the Junius Pamphlet, after the alias she used to publish the work.

[9] The best historical account of this period can be found in Pierre Broué, *The German Revolution 1917 –1923* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2006). See also Todd Chretien's excellent two part review, *International Socialist Review* 50 (November–December, 2006) and 52 (March–April, 2007).

[10] "The Red Flag," the newspaper of the recently-formed KPD.

[11] Quoted in Pierre Broué, *German Revolution*, 254

[12] Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done in Context* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008), 20.

[13] Christopher Hitchens, "Red Rosa," *The Atlantic* (June 2011).

[14] Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin: Revolution, Democracy, Socialism: Selected Writings* (London: Pluto, 2008), 24-5

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