

# A reply on Rosa Luxemburg's attitude to Lenin

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*The World Socialist Web Site recently received a letter on Rosa Luxemburg's attitude to Lenin. Below we post a reply by David North, chairman of the WSWs Editorial Board.*

Dear reader,

The rich and complex relationship between Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin, which spanned 20 years, should not be reduced to simplistic categorizations. Both of these great revolutionary theoreticians stood on the left wing of European Social Democracy in the years leading up to World War I and were resolute opponents of opportunism. Their disputes were, to a great extent, conditioned by the nature of the specific problems they confronted in the political milieus within which they worked.

For example, Luxemburg's distrust of Lenin's emphasis on strong central party leadership reflected, in part, her bitter conflict with the stifling bureaucratic structure of the German SPD. Similarly, the divergence of their positions on the national question stemmed, in part, from the fact that they were compelled, by the force of objective conditions, to approach this issue from somewhat different perspectives. Lenin, who was attempting to build a workers party in Tsarist Russia, the "prison house of nations," considered it essential to establish an impassable chasm between the Marxist movement and the Great Russian chauvinists of the bourgeois liberal Cadet Party. Luxemburg, in her capacity as a leading theoretician of the Polish Social Democracy, was compelled to wage an unrelenting fight against the petty-bourgeois pseudo-socialists of the nationalistic Pilsudski movement.

This is not to say that these disputes were merely of a conjunctural character, determined only by tactical considerations. The historical experience of the twentieth century, which has so thoroughly discredited the "liberationist" pretensions of so many bourgeois

national movements, has tended to validate Luxemburg's critique of the self-determination demand. But if the dispute over party organization is seen in the context of the broader struggle against opportunism in the international socialist movement, Lenin's struggle to build a new type of party was a political and intellectual achievement of the greatest historical magnitude. In the period between 1903 and 1914, he saw more clearly than any one else, Luxemburg and Trotsky included, that a revolutionary party could only be developed on the basis of an uncompromising fight against revisionism. Issues of party organization, Lenin insisted, had to be understood in the context of this fundamental struggle. Leninist "centralism" was the expression of the fight against the influence of opportunism within the workers movement.

As for Luxemburg's critique of the Russian Revolution, it must never be forgotten that this splendid pamphlet was written from the standpoint of unconditional defense of the October Revolution. The "mistakes" of Lenin and Trotsky, Luxemburg insisted, grew out of the impossible conditions that confronted the Bolshevik Party as a consequence of the betrayals of the Second International and German Social Democracy.

Notwithstanding her criticisms of certain aspects of Bolshevik policies and actions, Luxemburg left no doubt as to her immense admiration for the work of Lenin and Trotsky.

"The Bolsheviks," she wrote, "have shown that they are capable of everything that a genuine revolutionary party can contribute within the limits of the historical possibilities. They are not supposed to perform miracles. For a model and faultless proletarian revolution in an isolated land, exhausted by world war, strangled by imperialism, betrayed by the international

proletariat, would be a miracle.

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

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

Finally, a word of advice: Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg are not gods at whose altars we must worship. Rather, they were human beings who, for all their genius, were fallible. Confidence in the historical legacy of the socialist movement does not require utter faith in the correctness of every decision made by Lenin and Trotsky, or, for that matter, Luxemburg.

Sincerely,

David North

for the WSWs Editorial Board



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