One hundred years since the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht

Peter Schwarz
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Today marks the centenary of one of the most horrific and consequential crimes in world history. In Berlin on 15 January, 1919, Freikorps soldiers of the Garde-Kavallerie-Schützen Division arrested Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the two leaders of the German Communist Party (KPD), which had been founded just two weeks earlier. Soldiers transported them to the Hotel Eden, where they were tortured before being taken away and murdered.

The 48-year-old Rosa Luxemburg was among the most outstanding Marxist revolutionaries of her epoch. She gained notoriety for her sharp polemics against Eduard Bernstein's revisionism and the Social Democrats' pro-war policies in the First World War, and was the undisputed theoretical leader of the SPD's revolutionary wing and later of the Spartacus League.

Karl Liebknecht, who was the son of SPD founder Wilhelm Liebknecht and the same age as Luxemburg, embodied irreconcilable opposition to militarism and war. The bravery and determination with which he rebelled as an SPD parliamentary deputy against his own party, rejected war credits, and, despite persecution and suppression, fought and agitated against the war, won him the respect of millions of workers. In the November Revolution of 1918, he fought for the overthrow of capitalism. At a mass rally on 9 November he proclaimed the Free Socialist Republic of Germany.

The frail Rosa Luxemburg was struck down with the butt of a rifle in the Hotel Eden foyer and brought to a car where she was shot. Her body was thrown into the Landwehr canal, where it was recovered only months later. Karl Liebknecht was executed by three shots from close range in the Tiergarten. The press subsequently reported that Liebknecht was shot while trying to flee and that Luxemburg was lynched by an outraged mob.

The brutal murder of Luxemburg and Liebknecht marked a new stage of counter-revolutionary violence. Prior to this, the bourgeois state had ruthlessly cracked down on socialist opponents, and, as in the aftermath of the suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871 in France, took bloody revenge against revolutionary workers with mass executions. But the murder of the leaders of a revolutionary party by state organs without a trial or court judgment was a new phenomenon and set a precedent followed by others. Even the autocratic Tsarist regime generally banished socialist opponents to Siberia.

The German ruling class thereby drew the lessons from the Russian Revolution, where the subjective factor, the role of Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolshevik party, was decisive in leading the proletarian revolution to victory. In the days prior to the murders, leaflets were distributed in Berlin with the slogan "Kill their leaders!" The murders proceeded with the approval of the highest levels of the state.

Gustav Noske, the minister responsible for the Reichswehr and a leading SPD member, had ordered the Garde-Kavallerie-Schützen Division, which was notorious for its ruthless violence, to Berlin to be deployed against revolutionary workers. During the Bloody Christmas of 1918, they fired artillery at sailors in revolt who had occupied the Berlin castle and brutally suppressed the Spartacus uprising.

When a court martial acquitted those officers directly involved in Luxemburg and Liebknecht's murder in May 1919, Noske personally signed the acquittal. Waldemar Pabst, who as head of the Garde-Kavallerie-Schützen Division issued the order to murder Luxemburg and Liebknecht, was never charged. He was able to continue his career under the Nazis and in the post-war Federal Republic and died a wealthy arms trader in 1970.

To this day, the SPD disputes its responsibility for Luxemburg and Liebknecht's murder. But it is certain that Pabst spoke with Noske by telephone immediately prior to the killings. Pabst later confirmed on several occasions that he received the go-ahead from Noske. As he wrote in a 1969 letter which was found after his death, "It is obvious that there was no way I could have carried out the action without Noske's support—with Ebert in the background—and that I had to protect my officers. But very few people have understood why I was never called to testify or charged with an offence. As a cavalier, I acknowledged the SPD's behaviour at the time by keeping my mouth shut for fifty years about our cooperation."

The ruling class had to kill Luxemburg and Liebknecht to prevent the revolution, which spread like wildfire throughout Germany during November, from overthrowing capitalism as it had done in Russia. The Hohenzollern regime, which capitulated in the first days of the revolution, could not be saved. But this only made its base of support—industrial and finance capital, the big landowners, the military caste, and the reactionary judiciary, police, and administrative apparatus—all the more determined to defend their social position.

To this end they called upon Friedrich Ebert, the leader of the SPD, to form a new government on 9 November, 1918. Over the preceding four years, the SPD had demonstrated its unconditional loyalty to bourgeois rule with its support for the First World War. Ebert immediately aligned himself with the general staff of the army to suppress the revolution.

Thus, the first revolutionary wave was bloodily suppressed, but this by no means resolved the question of which class would rule. Until October 1923, when the KPD missed an extraordinarily favourable revolutionary opportunity and called off a prepared uprising at the last minute, ever-changing class conflicts and revolutionary opportunities broke out.

In addition, with the founding of the KPD at the turn of the year 1918-19, a crucial step forward in overcoming the SPD's betrayal and the Independent Social Democrats' (USPD) centrist policies was taken. The USPD had been founded at the beginning of 1917 by deputies expelled by the SPD for their refusal to back war credits. Nonetheless, the USPD entered Ebert's government in 1918 and served as a left fig leaf.

The KPD's founding programme, authored by Rosa Luxemburg, made unmistakably clear that the KPD was not striving to replace the Hohenzollern regime with a bourgeois parliamentary democracy but to overthrow bourgeois rule.

On 9 November the Hohenzollern regime had been driven out of power

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and workers' and soldiers' councils had been elected, the programme stated. "But the Hohenzollerns were no more than the front men of the imperialist bourgeoisie and of the Junkers. The class rule of the bourgeoisie is the real criminal responsible for the World War, in Germany as in France, in Russia as in England, in Europe as in America. The capitalists of all nations are the real instigators of the mass murder. International capital is the insatiable god Baal, into whose bloody maw millions upon millions of steaming human sacrifices are thrown."

The programme stressed that the alternatives were not reform or revolution, but socialism or barbarism. "The World War confronts society with the choice: either continuation of capitalism, new wars, and imminent decline into chaos and anarchy, or abolition of capitalist exploitation. … The words of the Communist Manifesto are the fiery writing on the wall above the crumbling bastions of capitalist society: *Socialism or barbarism*."

Luxemburg's warning was to be confirmed fourteen years later. The Weimar Republic was not the product of a victorious democratic revolution, but of counter-revolutionary violence. The murder of Luxemburg and Liebknecht set into motion a development that ultimately led to the coming to power of the Nazis. They rested on the same social forces that the Ebert regime had rescued and strengthened. Hitler's paramilitary SA emerged out of the Freikorps.

Part of the tragedy of Luxemburg and Liebknecht is that they underestimated the counter-revolutionary determination of their opponents. Otherwise they would have adopted better procedures and security measures to avoid falling into the hands of their captors.

The death of its two most important leaders was a disastrous blow to the KPD. It hindered the necessary process of clarification and consolidation within the young party, which grew rapidly into an organisation of a quarter of a million within two years. And it also weakened the party in critical revolutionary situations. There is much evidence to suggest, for example, that the KPD would have taken power in October 1923 had a Rosa Luxemburg or Karl Liebknecht stood at its head rather than the indecisive Heinrich Brandler.

Had Luxemburg and Liebknecht survived in 1919, not only German history, but also world history would have turned out differently. A victorious socialist revolution in Germany would have freed the Soviet Union from its isolation and thereby removed the most important factor for the growth of the bureaucracy and the rise of Stalin.

It is also inconceivable that the KPD, under the leadership of the uncompromising internationalist Rosa Luxemburg, would have bowed to Stalin's nationalist course, or supported his policy of social fascism, which paved the way for Hitler to come to power in 1933. The refusal of Stalin, and his German proxy Thälmann, to fight for a united front with the "social fascist" SPD against the Nazis divided and paralysed the working class. Based on a correct policy by the KPD, which had hundreds of thousands of members and millions of voters, the working class could have prevented Hitler from coming to power.

One hundred years after her death, many political tendencies are trying to co-opt Rosa Luxemburg by portraying her as a left-wing reformist or feminist.

The leaders of the Left Party, whose politics are much closer to those of Noske and Ebert than to Luxemburg's, made their pilgrimage once again this year to the tomb of the irreconcilable revolutionist to lay red carnations. The Berlin state senator for culture, the Left Party's Klaus Lederer, told the magazine *Zitty* that Luxemburg "understood social change as a process of comprehensive democratisation and transformation, and sought to democratise all spheres of society, including business." In a statement on the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the KPD, the Left Party's historical commission asserted that with Luxemburg's murder, the possibility was destroyed of developing the "KPD into a left-socialist party that did not follow the Bolshevik model."

In reality, Luxemburg was a relentless opponent of the policies referred to by the Left Party as "left-socialist." A large portion of her writings consists of polemics against Eduard Bernstein, Karl Kautsky and other representatives of those policies, who inevitably end up on the bourgeois side of the barricades when the class struggle intensifies.

Here is an example of an article published in the newspaper *Die Rote Fahne* (The Red Flag) three weeks after the USPD joined the Ebert government:

"Independent social democracy is inherently a child of weakness, and compromise is the essence of its existence… It has always trotted behind events and developments; it never took the lead… Any dazzling ambiguity that led to confusion among the masses… all the phrases of bourgeois demagogy that spread the veils, that obscured the naked, craggy facts of the revolutionary alternative during the war, found their eager support...

"A party of such constitution, suddenly faced with the historical decisions of the revolution, had to fail miserably… In the hour that finally makes the socialist goals the practical task of the day, the sharpest, most inexorable divorce between the camp of the revolutionary proletariat and the open as well as disguised enemies of revolution and socialism the highest duty, the Independent Party hastened to enter into a political partnership with the most dangerous outposts of counterrevolution, to confuse the masses and to facilitate treachery."

These words could also be used to describe the Left Party, which, however, stands far to the right of the USPD.

Many commentators have been compelled to admit that Luxemburg would have been contemptuous of the feminism and other forms of identity politics that are now in vogue in petty-bourgeois circles. As Elke Schmitter wrote in *Der Spiegel*, "The present insistence on disadvantage, whether due to birth or gender, status or religion, would have bored her." For Luxemburg, the overcoming of all forms of oppression was inseparably bound up with the overthrow of the capitalist system.

One hundred years after Luxemburg's death, all of the contradictions of the capitalist system that made the period 1914-45 the most violent in human history are erupting once again. Nationalism, trade war and war dominate international relations. Far-right and fascist forces are on the offensive in many countries, with the explicit or concealed support of the state. In Germany, refugee policy is being dictated by the far-right AfD, in whose ranks Waldemar Pabst would feel at home. In the army, the police and intelligence agencies, right-wing extremist networks are active and are being supported and trivialised by the highest echelons of the state.

This gives to the legacy of Liebknecht and Luxemburg a burning actuality. As Luxemburg formulated it in 1918, society once again confronts "either continuation of capitalism, new wars, and imminent decline into chaos and anarchy, or abolition of capitalist exploitation." More than ever before, humanity's future depends upon the construction of a socialist and internationalist party in the working class based on the legacy of Marxism. The Fourth International, which is today led by the International Committee, and its sections, the Socialist Equality parties, are the only political tendency that embodies these traditions.

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