150 years since the birth of Rosa Luxemburg

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The World Socialist Web Site is hosting an online meeting to mark the 150th anniversary of the birth of Rosa Luxemburg on Sunday, March 7 at 1 pm US Eastern Time. Register here.

150 years ago today, on March 5, 1871, Rosa Luxemburg was born in the small Polish town of Zamo??. Despite her premature and violent death at the age of 47, she was, together with Lenin and Trotsky, one of the most important revolutionary Marxist leaders of the 20th century. Under conditions of deep capitalist crisis, her work contains vital lessons for today.

Luxemburg combined personal courage, an unbreakable fighting spirit and unwavering principles with an outstanding intellect and extraordinary theoretical and rhetorical abilities. She was highly educated, spoke German, Polish, Russian and French fluently, and understood other languages. She was capable of tremendous passion and possessed a fascinating personality that attracted both workers and intellectuals.

She loved and was familiar with literature. At the age of six, she began writing for a children's newspaper, began translating Russian poetry into Polish shortly thereafter, and wrote her own poems. She could recite pages of the Polish national poet, Adam Mickiewicz, by heart, as well as German poets like Goethe and Mörike. Her love of nature is clearly shown in the pages of her letters. She initially studied biology before switching to law and economics. She obtained a doctorate at age 26 with summa cum laude.

Like all great progressive figures in world history, Luxemburg was either persecuted and slandered by her opponents, or embraced and falsified by false friends. Attempts have been made to co-opt her as a feminist, portray her as an advocate of a non-revolutionary road to socialism, and misuse her as a key witness against Bolshevism. Germany's Left Party, which embodies the exact opposite of Luxemburg in every aspect of its practical activity and every line of its program, even named its party foundation after the great revolutionary.

All of these attempts are exposed as frauds the moment one studies Luxemburg's biography and reads her writings. She committed herself unconditionally to the socialist revolution and uncompromisingly defended internationalism. Her struggle against Bernstein's revisionism and the conservatism of the trade unions, her unrelenting opposition to the First World War, and her leading role in the founding of the German Communist Party secure her place in the very first rank of revolutionary Marxism.

Luxemburg was firmly convinced that only the overthrow of capitalism by the working class could solve the great problems of humanity—exploitation, oppression and war—and that this required a struggle for socialist consciousness in the working class. The condescending ingratiation often adopted by left-wing intellectuals towards workers was totally foreign to her. She viewed it as her task to raise the consciousness of the workers, quench their thirst for knowledge and understanding, explain the social and political dynamics and elaborate the political tasks arising out of them. This made her incredibly popular among workers. When she spoke at election rallies for the Social Democrats (SPD), the venue was always packed to capacity.

Luxemburg always opposed bourgeois feminism. For her, the emancipation of women was inseparable from the liberation of the working class from capitalist exploitation and oppression. She did not struggle, like today's feminists and practitioners of identity politics, for the access of a few women to bourgeois privileges, but for the abolition of all privileges. When she spoke in 1912 at the second Social Democratic Women's Rally for universal, equal and direct suffrage for women, she justified this by saying that it would "immensely advance and intensify the proletarian class struggle." By "fighting for women's suffrage," she continued, "we will also hasten the coming of the hour when the present society falls in ruins under the hammer strokes of the revolutionary proletariat."

Luxemburg had differences of opinion with Lenin. But these were based, irrespective of their temporary sharpness, on "the common ground of revolutionary proletarian politics," as Trotsky once remarked. Lenin and Luxemburg were united in their struggle against the revisionist opponents of Marxism.

Luxemburg's work *Reform or Revolution?*, which consolidated her reputation as the leading voice of the revolutionary wing of Social Democracy when it was published in 1899, is one of the greatest polemics in Marxist literature. It is a devastating critique of the revisionism of Eduard Bernstein, who rejected the materialist basis of Marxist theory, severed socialism from the proletarian revolution, and transformed it into an ethically motivated liberalism.

Responding to Bernstein's infamous remark that the end goal did not matter to him, but the movement was everything, Luxemburg declared that the final goal of socialism is "the decisive factor" that transformed "the entire labour movement from a vain effort to repair the capitalist order into a class struggle against this order, for the suppression of this order." She went on, "In the controversy with Bernstein and his followers, everybody in the Party ought to understand clearly it is not a question of this or that method of struggle, or the use of this or that set of tactics, but of the very existence of the Social-Democratic movement."

Bernstein spoke for a layer of party officials, trade union bureaucrats and petty bourgeois who tied their own personal fate to the success of German imperialism. The economic upswing of the 1890s, the transformation of the SPD into a legal mass party, and the growth of the trade unions led to a rapid expansion of this layer.

The Russian Revolution of 1905 sharpened the conflicts within the SPD. The working class was the leading force of the revolution and produced two new achievements: the political mass strike and the soviet (workers' council). Luxemburg went to Warsaw, which was under Tsarist rule at the time, and participated in the revolution. She was subsequently arrested and only avoided a lengthy prison sentence and possible death thanks to the strenuous intervention of the SPD leadership.

When she propagated the political mass strike in Germany after her return, the trade union leaders reacted with horror. "General strike is general madness," was their response. The 1905 trade union congress in Cologne was held under the slogan, "The trade unions require peace first and foremost." Luxemburg was banned from speaking at trade union events.

The trade union leaders could not have illustrated their hostility to the

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socialist revolution more clearly. The debate over the mass strike now became the central area of conflict between the opportunist and revolutionary wings of the SPD.

With the approach of the First World War, the SPD leadership around August Bebel, who died in 1913, and Karl Kautsky shifted ever further to the right. When the war began, the opportunists in the SPD gained the upper hand. They stood firmly on the side of German imperialism. On August 4, 1914, the SPD's deputies in parliament voted for war credits. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht led the minority that resisted the wave of chauvinism.

Rosa Luxemburg's struggle against the war, which she conducted predominantly behind bars, was among the most heroic periods of her life. She tirelessly denounced the betrayal of the SPD, exposed the imperialist war crimes, and sought to rouse the masses. Already on the evening of August 4, 1914, she formed the International Group, which published *The International* and illegally circulated the *Spartacus Letters*, which led to the group being called the Spartacus League.

Luxemburg's first lead article in *The International* began with the words, "On August 4th, 1914, German Social Democracy abdicated politically, and at the same time the Socialist International collapsed. All attempts at denying or concealing this fact, regardless of the motives on which they are based, tend objectively to perpetuate, and to justify, the disastrous self-deception of the socialist parties, the inner malady of the movement that led to the collapse, and in the long run to make the Socialist International a fiction, a hypocrisy."

Rosa Luxemburg's struggle against the war rested on an irreconcilable internationalism that remained throughout her life.

As a 22-year-old student, she intervened at the congress of the Socialist International in Zürich to attack the social patriotism of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS). The PPS advocated the reestablishment of the Polish national state, which was at the time divided up between Russian, German and Austrian rule. Luxemburg rejected this demand and called for a joint struggle by the working class in Russian Poland and Russia to bring down Tsarism. She warned that the advocacy of Polish independence would encourage nationalist tendencies in the Second International, raise parallel national questions in other countries and sanction "the dissolution of the united struggle of all proletarians in every state into a series of fruitless national struggles."

Her refusal to accept the "right to self-determination of nations" in the program of Russian social democracy brought Luxemburg into conflict with Lenin, who advocated this right. But the difference here was less sharp than would later be claimed. For Lenin, the primary concern was the struggle against Great Russian chauvinism. For Luxemburg, it was the fight against Polish nationalism. Lenin also subordinated the national demands to the class struggle. He did not actively campaign for national separatism, but restricted himself "to the negative demand, so to speak, of the recognition of the *right* to self-determination."

Irrespective of the differences with Lenin, Luxemburg's hostility to nationalism proved to be extremely far-sighted. With respect to Poland, Józef Pi?sudski, the leader of the PPS, commanded the troops of the reconstituted independent Poland in the attack on the Red Army following the October Revolution. Between 1926 and 1935, he established an authoritarian dictatorship. Today, the nationalist right in Poland hails him as their hero.

The capitulation to nationalism was also the reason for the collapse of the Second and Third internationals, which resulted in terrible defeats for the working class. The Second International supported the first World War in the name of the "defense of the fatherland," while the Third degenerated under the Stalinist perspective of "socialism in one country."

The Stalinists, who trampled Lenin's nationalities policy under foot and reverted to the worst practices of Great Russian chauvinism, never forgave Luxemburg for her internationalism. Under Stalin's rule, the accusation of "Luxemburgism" had for a time no less fatal consequences than that of "Trotskyism." Even after Stalin's death, Georg Lukacs accused the great revolutionary Luxemburg of having represented "national nihilism."

By the 1990s at the latest, the demand for the right of nations to self-determination lost all progressive and democratic significance. The globalization of the economy and the emergence of a working class in the most far-flung parts of the world left no room for even semi-democratic nation states. Imperialism used the slogan of self-determination to destroy and subordinate existing states. In these states, this demand enabled rival bourgeois cliques to split the working class and to serve imperialism. This was shown by the tragedy of Yugoslavia. In the name of national self-determination, the country and its separate parts were forced into a murderous fratricidal war that resulted in the establishment of seven economically unviable states governed by criminal cliques.

Luxemburg and the Spartacus League not only combatted the right-wing SPD leadership but also the "Marxist Centre" and its theoretical leader, Karl Kautsky, whom Luxemburg termed "the theoretician of the swamp." The Centre made verbal concessions to the radical mood of the workers but opposed any revolutionary action in practice, and supported the pro-war course of the SPD leaders. After it was thrown out of the SPD in 1917 and willy-nilly formed the Independent Social Democrats (USPD), Luxemburg sharpened her criticism.

The USPD "always trotted behind events and developments; it never took the lead," she wrote. "It has never been able to draw a fundamental line between itself and the dependent ones. Any dazzling ambiguity that led to confusion among the masses: peace of understanding, the League of Nations, disarmament, the Wilson cult, 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. The whole attitude of the party circled helplessly around the cardinal contradiction that on the one hand it tried to continue to make the bourgeois governments as the appointed powers inclined to make peace, while on the other hand it spoke the word of the mass action of the proletariat. An accurate mirror of contradictory practice is eclectic theory: a hodgepodge of radical formulas with the hopeless abandonment of the socialist spirit."

Luxemburg was often condemned for her "theory of spontaneity": for trusting in the independent uprising of the masses against the ossified apparatuses, for criticizing Lenin's concept of the party, and for delaying her organizational break with the SPD. Leon Trotsky, who himself waged a struggle against centrist tendencies that falsely based themselves on Luxemburg prior to the formation of the Fourth International, made the most fundamental points on this issue in 1935.

The "weak sides and inadequacies" were "by no means decisive in Rosa," he wrote. Luxemburg's counterposition of "the spontaneity of mass actions" to the conservative policy of the SPD "had a thoroughly revolutionary and progressive character." Trotsky continued, "At a much earlier date than Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg grasped the retarding character of the ossified party and trade-union apparatus and began a struggle against it."

"Rosa herself never confined herself to the mere theory of spontaneity," but "exerted herself to educate the revolutionary wing of the proletariat in advance and to bring it together organizationally as far as possible. In Poland, she built up a very rigid independent organization. The most that can be said is that in her historical-philosophical evaluation of the labor movement, the preparatory selection of the vanguard, in comparison with the mass actions that were to be expected, fell too short with Rosa; whereas Lenin—without consoling himself with the miracles of future actions—took the advanced workers and constantly and tirelessly welded them together into firm nuclei, illegally or legally, in the mass organizations or underground, by means of a sharply defined program."

When the Bolsheviks took power in Russia in October 1917, they met

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with Luxemburg's enthusiastic support. Her text "On the Russian Revolution," which she wrote isolated in prison and which was only published three years after her death, has often been interpreted as a deep-going critique of Bolshevism. But that is incorrect. Luxemburg unconditionally defended the October Revolution and noted that the "mistakes" she criticized arose out of the impossible conditions the Bolsheviks confronted due to the betrayal by the Second International and German Social Democracy.

"The Bolsheviks," she wrote, "have shown that they are capable of everything that a genuine revolutionary party can contribute within the limits of historical possibilities… What is necessary is to distinguish the essential from the non-essential, the kernel from the accidental excrescences in the politics 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 political 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.'"

In November 1918, revolution also erupted in Germany. Initiated by a sailors' uprising in Kiel, it spread like wildfire throughout the country. The Kaiser abdicated, and the ruling elites handed government power over to the SPD leader Friedrich Ebert, who plotted an alliance with the military high command to bloodily suppress the working class. The USPD also participated in the Ebert government with three ministers.

Amid the revolutionary struggles, the Spartacus League formed the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in Berlin at the end of 1918. Rosa Luxemburg wrote the party program and presented it to the delegates. It explicitly formulated the goal of overthrowing bourgeois class rule. The alternative was not reform or revolution, the program stressed. Rather, "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…In this hour, socialism is the only salvation for humanity. The words of the Communist Manifesto flare like a fiery *menetekel* above the crumbling bastions of capitalist society: socialism or barbarism."

The Ebert government was determined to prevent the socialist revolution. On January 15, 1919, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were, on the explicit orders of Reichswehr Minister Gustav Noske (SPD), brutally murdered. The crime was carried out by the Freikorps "Garde-Kavallerie-Schützendivision," which had been brought to Berlin by Noske to militarily suppress the uprising. They kidnapped the pair and took them to their headquarters at the Hotel Eden, where they were interrogated and abused. Luxemburg was subsequently struck to the ground with rifle butts in the entrance to the hotel and bundled into a car, where she was shot. Her body was thrown into the Landwehr canal, where it was found only several weeks later. Karl Liebknecht was executed by three shots fired at close range in the Berlin Tiergarten.

The murders were fully endorsed by the state. The officers directly involved were acquitted by a military court in May 1919. Waldemar Pabst, who gave the order as head of the division, was able to continue his career under the Nazis and in the Federal Republic. He died in 1970 as a wealthy arms trader. Already by this point, the course had been set for the subsequent rise of the Nazis. Hitler's SA would go on to recruit from the soldiers mobilized by Noske and protected by the judiciary.

The murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg was a heavy blow to the international workers' movement. With Luxemburg leading the KPD, German and even world history would probably have turned out differently. There is much to suggest that the KPD would have taken power in October 1923 had it possessed an experienced leadership. Humanity may well have been spared Adolf Hitler, whose rise occurred above all thanks to the paralyzing of the working class by the disastrous "social fascist" policy of the Stalinized KPD. Stalin's own rise would have faced bitter opposition from within the Communist International.

Rosa Luxemburg's heritage—her internationalism, her orientation to the working class, her revolutionary socialism—has been defended and developed by the world Trotskyist movement, represented today by the International Committee of the Fourth International. It is a crucial weapon in the struggle for the socialist revolution.

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