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## **‘Political life is dying out’: Rosa Luxemburg’s critique of Bolshevism and the Bolshevik revolution**

This article analyses the critical comments of Rosa Luxemburg on Lenin’s model of the Bolshevik vanguard-party with its elite of professional revolutionaries and on the political events in Russia after the Bolshevik revolution. Rosa Luxemburg had a different concept of socialist revolution than Lenin did, for she regarded the revolutionary process as something that was based on the spontaneous actions of the working class and the mass participation of the people. A socialist party could channel and co-ordinate this revolutionary energy, but Rosa Luxemburg attached great importance to democratic freedoms and procedures and rejected the dictatorial tendencies emerging in Bolshevik Russia. She was hoping that the Bolshevik revolution would be the beginning of a European socialist revolution and never believed that Russia could make a socialist transformation on its own. In fact, she foresaw the bureaucratic dictatorship that Lenin’s Russia would in her view inevitably become, if the deformation of the revolution was not halted by international political developments on a higher democratic and socialist level.

**Key words:** Rosa Luxemburg; Social Democracy; Lenin; Bolshevism; Russian revolution; democracy

Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) was undoubtedly one of the most original revolutionary socialists and Marxist thinkers of early-twentieth-century Europe. She was also one of a very small group of women who occupied leading positions in the international socialist movement of her time, this classical period when the movement came into its own and when there were great expectations regarding the coming ‘proletarian revolution.’ After the Russian and Polish revolutionary events of 1904-1906, Rosa Luxemburg increasingly began to distance herself from the strategy and the organizational model of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), a politically immobile colossus. But on the other hand, she did not agree

with Lenin's alternative model of the revolutionary vanguard-party either. She believed in the spontaneous revolutionary potential and capability of the working class, which simultaneously would create a special role for a revolutionary leadership once the dynamic of social and political revolution had reached a critical stage. Both the German model of bureaucratized mass organization and passive anticipation of the 'inevitable' proletarian revolution, and the Bolshevik model of a revolution carried out by 'professional' revolutionaries supported by the proletariat and other social groups, proved eventually alien to her. Perhaps Rosa Luxemburg's Polish background played a part in her rejection of both German bureaucratic reformism and Russian conspiratorial elitism. Her Jewish background, moreover, may have been partly responsible for her staunch internationalism and her rejection of Polish nationalism, including the national aspirations of Józef Piłsudski and mainstream Polish socialism. Thus it happened that Polish nationalism, German Social Democratic reformism, and Russian Bolshevism all became political adversaries of Rosa Luxemburg. This was important also in practical political terms, because she played a role in both the Polish, the German and, to some extent, the Russian socialist movement. She regarded the Polish proletarian revolution as a part of the broader All-Russian democratic and socialist revolution, while the revolution of the German proletariat seemed to her – and to most revolutionary socialists of the time – the *conditio sine qua non* of the European revolution as a whole. Aside from her views on socialism, internationalism, and revolution, her early confrontation with Lenin's Bolshevik model of organization in 1904 was an important step in her political evolution. This paper, however, will focus mainly on Rosa Luxemburg's critique of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917-1918.<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of 1904 Rosa Luxemburg began to look more closely into the issues which had caused disagreement between her Polish-Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (the anti-nationalist rival of the Polish Socialist Party) and the Russian Social Democrats and which had ended the hope of organizational unity between them, especially because of the extreme centralistic policy of the Bolsheviks (the Russian 'majority' faction). Rosa Luxemburg found out about Lenin's brochure *What is to be done?*, which had just been published. In response she wrote a long and very critical article ('Organizational Questions in Russian Social Democracy') about Lenin's organizational propositions, which was published in the German Social Democratic journal *Neue Zeit* in July 1904 and, in Russian

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<sup>1</sup> See for a useful background history of Europe in the age of Rosa Luxemburg, including developments in contemporary socialism, James Joll, *Europe Since 1870. An International History* (4th ed., London, 1990), Chapters 3-9. See for a complex work on Marxist thought, George Lichtheim, *Marxism* (London, 1961).

translation, in the Russian Social Democratic newspaper *Iskra*. Rosa Luxemburg attacked Lenin's philosophy underlying his detailed prescriptions on organizational matters, citing his definition of Social Democracy as 'Jacobins joined to a proletariat which has become conscious of its class interests.' This elitist Jacobin and almost Blanquist notion – the latter being even more conspiratorial than the former – was not at all to her liking. Rosa Luxemburg writes: 'Social Democracy is not joined to the organization of the proletariat. It is itself the proletariat ... it is the rule of the majority within its own party.' Instead of an all-powerful central committee whose instructions ran 'from Geneva to Liège and from Tomsk to Irkutsk, the role of the director must go to the collective ego of the working class... The working class demands the right to make its mistakes and learn in the dialectic of history. Let us speak plainly. Historically, the errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement are infinitely more fruitful than the infallibility of the cleverest Central Committee.' Rosa Luxemburg also attacked Lenin's analogy of factory discipline as being a useful school for a revolutionary party, and his preoccupation with discipline as a whole. She believed that leadership by the kind of disciplined party that Lenin wanted to create would hold the working class back rather than push it forward. In Germany, but even more in Russia, organizational rigidity would suppress revolutionary activity: 'If there was inertia and over-emphasis of parliamentary tactics in Germany, this was the result of too much direction rather than too little, and the adoption of Lenin's formula would only increase rather than thaw out such conservative inertia. How much worse would be such a straitjacket for nascent Russian Social Democracy on the eve of its battles against Tsarism.'<sup>2</sup>

It has been argued by Nettl and others that Rosa Luxemburg's call for broad popular participation in Russian Social Democratic activity was partly due to an excessive transplantation of idealized German conditions into the Russian context, just as Lenin's concept and the conditions determining it were far too narrowly Russian to have general validity. Underlying this, however, was the more fundamental question, not of organization or political conditions, but of the nature and growth of class consciousness. Lenin believed that without the active intervention of a revolutionary elite, working-class consciousness was doomed to a vicious circle of impotence – that it could never rise above the economic level of trade-union activity. Rosa Luxemburg, on the other hand, believed that class consciousness was essentially a problem of friction between Social Democracy

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<sup>2</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, 'Organizational Questions in Russian Social Democracy', *Neue Zeit*, 1903-1904, Vol. II; *Iskra*, 10 July 1904. Published in English translation by Bertram D. Wolfe (ed.), *Leninism or Marxism? The Russian Revolution* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1961), pp. 84, 89, 93, 108 for the passages quoted.

and society, of the permanent conflict between the socialist working-class movement and the structures – including the ideological structures – of capitalism. The more closely Social Democracy was engaged with bourgeois society on all fronts, the greater the growth of class consciousness in what was a continual process. She proved from her own experience that elites or a socialist intelligentsia were necessary, but to say that they should have a specific function in Marxist theory or revolutionary strategy was another matter. What mattered for Rosa Luxemburg was not power but influence: instead of a dynamo which drove the whole socialist works, a 'revolutionary elite' should be a magnet with a powerful field of influence over existing structures and conditions of class struggle. This influence grew as societal friction increased, but this friction and class conflict was the source of all revolutionary energy.<sup>3</sup> Rosa Luxemburg wrote optimistically about the dynamic of modern proletarian class consciousness: 'For the first time in the history of civilization the people are expressing their will consciously and in opposition to all ruling classes. But this will can only be satisfied beyond the limits of the existing system. Today the mass can only acquire and strengthen this will in the course of the day-to-day struggle against the existing social order – that is, within the limits of capitalist society.' She believed that acquiring class consciousness within the structure of capitalist society was both possible and necessary and that in the end it would open the way to a new society. In this struggle there were two dangers to be avoided. One was 'the danger of becoming a movement of bourgeois social reform', the other 'the danger of sinking back to the condition of a sect.'<sup>4</sup>

Of course, Rosa Luxemburg was aware of the unique Russian conditions as far as the country's political system and political culture were concerned. An historian of the Russian revolution like E.H. Carr stresses this aspect in particular when analyzing her article of July 1904. Carr draws attention to the fact that Rosa Luxemburg denounced Lenin's policy of 'ultra-centralism' as bureaucratic and not democratic. Indeed, she diagnosed a specifically Russian character in Lenin's project and spoke of 'the "ego" crushed by Russian absolutism' reappearing in the form of 'the "ego" of the Russian revolutionary', which proclaims itself the mighty consummator of history.<sup>5</sup> Lenin in reply offered the readers of his Bolshevik publications a number of negative references to what he called Rosa Luxemburg's fallacious Marxist theory of 'organization-as-process.' Most of these described her views as 'little else but defence of a lack of principles', and 'something not to be taken seriously.' He also lumped Rosa Luxemburg with the

<sup>3</sup> J. P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969), pp. 197-198.

<sup>4</sup> Luxemburg, 'Organizational Questions in Russian Social Democracy', in Wolfe (ed.), *Leninism or Marxism?*, p. 105.

<sup>5</sup> E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923, Vol. 1* (Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 45.

Mensheviks, which made it easier for him and his Bolshevik comrades to dismiss her ideas. The Lenin-Luxemburg confrontation was destined to become a major issue in the revolutionary Marxist and international socialist movement between the 1920s and 1960s, although the principal factor triggering it was Rosa Luxemburg's critique of the Bolshevik revolution written in 1918.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, her critical response to Lenin's *What is to be done?*, was a first step in the direction of a revolutionary Marxist anti-Leninist position.

During the years between 1904 and 1914, Rosa Luxemburg experienced a process of radicalization as far as her attitude to German Social Democracy was concerned. One factor which played an important part in this was her experience of the Russian and Polish revolutionary events of 1904-1906. Rosa Luxemburg was one of the leading figures in the revolutionary actions in Warsaw during 1905-1906 and after her return to Berlin in 1906, where she had settled in 1898, she was not quite the same person anymore. She now believed in revolutionary mass action more than ever before and began to criticize the SPD more consistently and systematically. At the same time the contacts between the Polish Marxists – Rosa Luxemburg's Social Democratic Party of Poland and Lithuania – and the Russian Bolsheviks and other Russian revolutionaries were only sporadic and not very significant it seems, in terms of influencing one another. It is true that some Polish revolutionaries began to gravitate towards the Bolsheviks and their concept of a disciplined elite-party seizing power, especially during and immediately after the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. But Rosa Luxemburg and most other Polish and German revolutionary socialists retained their belief in the power of spontaneous proletarian revolution without the decisive role of a leading party which the Bolsheviks maintained was indispensable for the success of such a revolution. The outbreak of the First World War changed many things in the field of political work, which was restricted by censorship and military conscription. A major problem in Germany was also the force of patriotism and chauvinism, which Rosa Luxemburg had already experienced on several occasions before 1914. It was clear that the spirit of national chauvinism was also influential among the working class, even though Marxists like Rosa Luxemburg were always trying to explain it away. Rosa Luxemburg had the courage to confront and criticize German chauvinism whenever there was an opportunity to do so, and for this reason she was hated by many people in Germany, including trade unionists and even some Social Democratic party members. Although on one level (her Marxist worldview) she scarcely could take the phenomenon of proletarian national chauvinism seriously, on another

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<sup>6</sup> Luciano Amodio, 'The Lenin-Luxemburg Confrontation on Party Organization', *Quaderni Piacentini*, Vol. IV, No. 21 (1965) gives a summary of the literature on the most typical issues.

level (her observation of social and political reality) she understood very well what it meant and how difficult it was to combat or overcome it. This is the reason for her disagreement with the Bolshevik strategy after November 1917 of trying to conclude a unilateral peace with Germany. What would be the effect of this on the chances of Germany to win the war in the West and on the mind of the German working class? Rosa Luxemburg knew the answer to this question much better than Lenin did. She feared that a German victory would mean an enormous boost for German popular chauvinism and the end of the chances for a socialist revolution. But to make this clear to Lenin and his Bolsheviks was not a simple matter, nor was it easy to convince them that only a socialist revolution in Russia that was also democratic could mean the beginning of a successful world revolution.<sup>7</sup> The Bolshevik scholasticism about a dictatorship of the proletariat supported by the peasants was improbable enough, but in addition there appeared a questionable one-party dictatorship.

Lenin's sceptical attitude to the February Revolution and his insistence that the Provisional Government end Russian participation in the war and make peace with Germany had not been received with approval by Rosa Luxemburg. She advocated a consolidation of the democratic revolution and concluding a peace deal only if this was really in the interest of the Russian proletariat as well as the German and European revolution. Looking out from Germany, the Russian February Revolution had achieved something worth defending against the strong and reactionary German power, which might want peace with Russia for tactical reasons but in the long run would want even more to destroy the revolution. This approach to the Russian situation continued to be the position of the *Spartakus* League – the new revolutionary socialist organization in Germany which had been founded at the end of 1915 – until the end of 1918 (even if after March 1918 they were led not to stress it too much). *Spartakus* recognized the need for peace as the only way to open up further revolutionary horizons, but not a peace which left Imperial Germany triumphant. Rosa Luxemburg, who spent most of 1917-1918 in German prisons, knew nothing of the negotiations between the left-wing Social Democrats Parvus and Karl Moor and the German Foreign Office, and of the impending journey of Lenin and his entourage through Germany in a sealed train provided by the German government. But even if she had not been in prison she would not have known or even believed it, because such eventualities were to her mind impossible. What she wanted to do was to help bring about a revolutionary

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<sup>7</sup> See for Rosa Luxemburg's political experiences and political evolution in the years before and during the First World War, especially Netti, *Rosa Luxemburg*, Chapters 8-14. See also Paul Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg. Her Life and Work* (London, 1940).

outbreak in Germany, without which the revolutionary process in Russia could not survive. Rosa Luxemburg thought in terms of a radical democratic and democratic socialist revolution, whose success would obviously be dependent on further revolutionary developments on the international level. Of an isolated Bolshevik dictatorship in the near future she had of course not the slightest supposition, nor could she foresee the relative success of Lenin's policy of peace and land distribution to the peasants as a tactic to seize and consolidate power. The peculiar factors playing a part in the Bolshevik revolution were beyond the grasp and indeed the approval of most European Marxist revolutionaries.<sup>8</sup> Only during the course of 1918 did Rosa Luxemburg begin to understand something more of the realities and the problems surrounding the Bolshevik revolution and the Bolshevik regime. At the end of 1917, following the Bolsheviks' seizure of power, the foremost issue from the German perspective was their intention to conclude an armistice and then a separate peace with Germany.

By the middle of November 1917 the impending peace negotiations with the Bolsheviks had begun to be reported in the German press. Rosa Luxemburg's comments on the Bolsheviks and their revolution now became more incisive and critical, although her first reactions to the news about the revolution in Petrograd had been warm and welcoming if apprehensive. In a letter written on 19 December to Karl and Luise Kautsky, prominent German Social Democrats who had taken some distance from the official Social Democratic 'pro-war' policy, she confided that the Bolsheviks did not please her 'with their fanatical determination to make peace at any price', even if they were not to blame for the situation as it was.<sup>9</sup> Doubts about the wisdom of a Russian revolutionary peace with German imperialism were expressed in the first public comment of the monthly letter of the *Spartakus* League on the events of the Russian October Revolution. It saw in the conclusion of peace nothing but benefit for German imperialism and its ultimate wish to destroy the Russian revolution. The article 'Historical Responsibility' in the *Spartakus* letter of January 1918 was sour and unhappy in tone. An armistice had meanwhile been concluded between Germany and Russia, but no good could come from it. The article stated:<sup>10</sup>

'It is psychologically understandable that the Bolsheviks should see a prestige success in that most important question of peace and should present themselves as successful to the Russian people. But a second look shows the Bolsheviks in another light. The immediate effect of the armistice in the East will merely be that

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<sup>8</sup> Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, pp. 422-424.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 426.

<sup>10</sup> *Spartakusbrief*, January 1918, translated and quoted in Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 427.

German troops will be moved from there to the West ... Already the last bloody German advances in Flanders and in the South, the new 'marvellous' successes in Italy, are the direct results of Bolshevik victory in Petersburg ... the mask of virtue and restraint which was forced on German imperialism by its precarious military situation up till now will be thrown into the lap of the Scheidemanns [Social Democratic opportunists]. With the help of God – who is undoubtedly on the side of the big battalions – a 'German peace' will be dictated ... This is how the situation really is and the Bolsheviks are only deceiving themselves and others if they hear the melody of peace on earth ... The last laugh about the Russian revolution has hitherto been exclusively enjoyed by Hindenburg and the German nationalists.'

The *Spartakus* letter of January 1918 – whose author may have been Leo Jogiches, who was very close to Rosa Luxemburg – continued in its pessimistic but also realistic tone by claiming that the German workers 'continue to watch the spectacle [of the Russian revolution] good-naturedly, continue to be mere spectators, and so Soviet rule in Russia cannot find a fate different from the Paris Commune.' The fact that the Bolsheviks negotiated in Stockholm in December 1917 about a possible peace with Germany 'through such dirty channels' as Scheidemann and Parvus (who was more leftist but mistrusted by the Spartacists) proved that the Bolsheviks themselves too 'suffer from a lack of principle, which is completely at variance with their usual severe morality and intolerance of compromise.' After the conclusion of the peace of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, public comment by *Spartakus* became less negative because Lenin, the great revolutionary leader, made a great effort to explain and excuse it. The Spartacists now more or less seemed to agree that criticism of the Bolsheviks should remain within closed doors and not be made public, and only by August or September this policy was abandoned by Rosa Luxemburg. Karl Liebknecht, isolated in prison too, wrote in his private notes in the spring of 1918 that 'any basic tendency to anti-Leninism' must be avoided, adding: 'Greatest care and tact in all German criticism of Russian proletariat!' What played a role in this German reticence as well was that following the treaty of Brest-Litovsk German troops occupied the Ukraine and large parts of the Baltic States and Finland. Violent opposition to these annexations also helped the Bolsheviks. It was as if Germany was once more at war with Russia and the problems of conscience posed by the separate peace were, to some extent, things of the past. However, the critique of Bolshevism continued to exist and did not exclusively relate to the question of the peace with Germany. At the end of the summer of 1918, Rosa Luxemburg informed her *Spartakus* comrades that she wanted to publish her criticisms of the Bolshevik revolu-



tion in the form of a pamphlet or a long article. They tried to dissuade her, but were unsuccessful. In the *Spartakus* letter of September 1918 Rosa Luxemburg broke a long period of silence and published an article voicing a sharp critique of the Bolsheviks. The editors of the *Spartakus* letter only published it with a cautionary note of their own. When she wrote a further article containing an even sharper attack on the supplementary protocols to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, her comrades Paul Levi, Ernst Meyer and Eugen Leviné decided not to print it. Rosa Luxemburg's articles had been delivered in Berlin by Mathilde Jacob, who used to visit her in her Breslau prison. Now Paul Levi travelled to Breslau and after a lengthy argument convinced her that publication was unwise, apparently using the argument that her remarks would be misused by their enemies. But after Levi's departure Rosa Luxemburg wrote out a draft text which she sent him later in September through an intermediary. In a personal letter she explained to Levi that she was writing it only for him, 'and if I can convince *you* then the effort isn't wasted.' The September 1918 manuscript was eventually published by Paul Levi in 1922, causing a wave of hatred against him and other critical communists on the part of Leninists and orthodox pro-Moscow communists.<sup>11</sup>

In the historic September 1918 manuscript Rosa Luxemburg went back to basic principles, the text being not only a comment on the Russian revolution but also on the meaning and the general idea of socialist revolution. She admitted that for the moment Lenin and the Bolsheviks had been able to carry out a decisive revolutionary action and in a sense 'won a majority of the people' when doing so (she did not realize the extent to which the Bolsheviks were a minority in Russia). But there were many problems of a fundamental kind, which posed a mortal threat to the revolutionary project in Russia. The first problem that Rosa Luxemburg addressed was Bolshevik land policy. On this issue she was more to the left than Lenin, and she criticized the fact that his government had not taken measures 'which lead in the direction of a later Socialist reform of agriculture.' The government must 'at least avoid everything which may bar the way to those measures in future.' Now, however, 'the slogan launched by the Bolsheviks – immediate seizure and distribution of the land to the peasants – necessarily tended in the opposite direction.' Not only was it not a Socialist measure, but 'it piles up insurmountable obstacles to the Socialist transformation of agrarian relations.' Leninist policy 'has created a new and powerful layer of enemies of Socialism in the countryside, enemies whose resistance will be much more dangerous and stub-

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 427-430, for detailed references to original German sources; Hannah Arendt, 'Introduction' to Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*. Paul Levi published Rosa Luxemburg's text as *Die russische Revolution* (Berlin 1922).

born than that of the large aristocratic landowners.<sup>12</sup> The terrible events in Russia and the Ukraine when at a later stage agriculture was nationalized, confirmed Rosa Luxemburg's fears and analysis. Of course, Lenin knew that at some point in the future the resistance of the peasantry would have to be broken, but what mattered to him in 1917-1918 was to consolidate the revolution, that is Bolshevik power, by using the peasants as allies in a strategic game. In fact, the Russian peasants – who also constituted the bulk of the soldiers – were absolutely crucial in establishing and consolidating Bolshevik power. The slogan of peace, bread and land was a *conditio sine qua non* of the Bolshevik revolution. The Russian situation was completely different from the situation in Central Europe, where the Social Democrats feared the counter-revolutionary orientation of the peasantry. In this connection the observations of the historian George Lichtheim are worth quoting. Lichtheim writes that the Russian peasant-soldier made the Bolshevik seizure of power possible by backing the urban revolt, whereas in Central Europe the conservatism of the peasantry 'supplied the Social Democrats with an adequate reason for not attempting a revolution on the Russian model.'<sup>13</sup> The exceptional Russian situation of agrarian backwardness and semi-feudalism thus made the revolution possible and at the same time heralded serious trouble in future. Rosa Luxemburg foresaw this and feared the counter-revolutionary consequences of an enlarged and fortified peasantry. Of course, as a socialist she had little affinity with the peasants anyhow, which is one of the tragic and fatal weaknesses of the socialist tradition.

The second problem that Rosa Luxemburg addressed in her manuscript on the Russian revolution was the nationality question. Perhaps even more than in the case of the land question, she was an orthodox Marxist of sorts who was not prepared to make any concessions in this field. It had been a tradition in the international socialist movement to actually back the national aspirations of at least some 'historic nations' that were supposed to play a progressive role in the historical process. Foremost among these nations were the Poles, and both the German Social Democrats and the Bolsheviks supported the programme of Polish independence from the Russian empire, the Germans on account of a sentiment going back to Marx himself and the Bolsheviks, again, for strategic reasons, i.e. weakening the Russian czarist state by all means. Rosa Luxemburg, however, disagreed with both of them. She had always believed that Polish independence was a naïve dream and that Poland had become an integral part of the economy of the Russian empire. Moreover, Polish nationalism – which was also very influential

<sup>12</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*, English edition in Wolfe (ed.), *Leninism or Marxism?*, pp. 43, 46.

<sup>13</sup> George Lichtheim, *Europe in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1974), p. 141.

in the Polish working-class movement – was in her view an enemy of socialism and class consciousness infecting the workers with hopelessly wrong ideas. Here we stumble upon another blind spot of a major section (but not the whole) of the international socialist movement, and Rosa Luxemburg was a principal exponent of it. As the historian Piotr Wandycz writes, ‘the socialist fatherland was as real to Rosa Luxemburg as Poland was to Piłsudski’ with the Polish ‘internationalists’ arguing that for the Polish proletariat national independence would mean ‘regression.’<sup>14</sup> As far as Bolshevik nationality policy was concerned, Rosa Luxemburg warned of the consequences of tactically proclaiming support for the aspirations of various non-Russian nationalities in the country, as the Bolsheviks were doing as long as they had not yet consolidated their power in non-Russian regions. It was a similar situation to the case of the peasants, because the nationalists among the different non-Russian peoples would become dangerous enemies of the revolution at a later stage. Ukrainian nationalism, for example, she regarded as a ‘farce’, but it might nevertheless develop into a force to reckon with thanks to Lenin’s policy and the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which opened the way for several nationalist movements with their slogan of the ‘right of national determination.’ According to Rosa Luxemburg, it was obvious that the ‘entire nationalist movement which at present constitutes the greatest danger for international Socialism has experienced an extraordinary strengthening from the ... Russian revolution and the Brest negotiations.’ From all this ‘the terror and the strangling of democracy followed directly.’<sup>15</sup> The ‘terror’ and the ‘strangling of democracy’ that Rosa Luxemburg is speaking of, is exactly what was happening already at the time when she was writing down these words. The Bolsheviks had begun to suppress the resistance of national minorities, peasants, and of course their various political opponents in the major Russian cities, where many people initially believed that they could shake off the Bolshevik regime.

The questions of political democracy and dictatorship were the third and fourth problem that Rosa Luxemburg addressed, and they were in the final analysis the most important ones and the most crucial in judging the character of the Bolshevik regime. The third problem, that of political freedoms and democratic procedures, she discussed under the heading of ‘Constituent Assembly and Suffrage.’ What mattered here was Bolshevik policy with regard to parliamentary democracy, free elections, and so forth. Rosa Luxemburg criticized the Bolsheviks’ action in dispersing the Constituent Assembly in January 1918, the election of which they had

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<sup>14</sup> Piotr S. Wandycz, *The price of freedom: A history of East Central Europe from the Middle Ages to the present* (London, 1993), pp. 192-193.

<sup>15</sup> Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*, pp. 55-56; see also Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923, Vol. 1*, p. 268.

not dared to stop although they had restricted the suffrage, which she criticized as well. She attacked Trotsky's relativizing theory that institutions tend to lead a life of their own, and if they did not reflect the particular reality of their age of origin anymore, must be destroyed. To this Rosa Luxemburg opposed her own long-held view about mass influence on institutions, which could be seen as their most important aspect. She writes: 'The living fluid of popular mood, continually forced round representative bodies, penetrates them, guides them ... even in bourgeois parliaments.'<sup>16</sup> Even more serious than the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly was the Bolsheviks' suppression of civic and political freedoms:<sup>17</sup>

'... freedom of the press, the rights of association and assembly all have been outlawed for all opponents of the Soviet regime ... on the other hand it is a well-known and indisputable fact that without a free and untrammelled press, without the unlimited right of association and assembly, the role of the broad mass of the people is entirely unthinkable.'

If Bolshevik rule (or the 'Soviet regime' of the workers' councils controlled by the Bolsheviks) was in any way to be an example for the future and for the socialist revolution in Germany and Europe, and not simply a means of clinging to power at the price of dictatorial deformation and political regression, purity of socialist principles, including democratic principles, needed emphasizing continually. Arbitrary curtailment of inconvenient institutions and popular processes after a revolution was bound to be self-generating and repetitive. They were bad habits which would lead the government ever farther away from contact with the people.<sup>18</sup> The problem of dictatorship was discussed in more detail in the last sections of Rosa Luxemburg's September 1918 manuscript. She writes:<sup>19</sup>

'Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party – however numerous they may be – is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently ... because all that is instructive, wholesome and purifying in political freedom depends on this essential characteristic; and its effectiveness vanishes when "freedom" becomes a special privilege.'

These were historic words that deserved and still deserve to be remembered by socialists and democrats. They show Rosa Luxemburg's belief in political freedom and democratic life, or more precisely, in the democracy that socialists like her had always believed to be possible only after the socialist revolution. Rosa

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<sup>16</sup> Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*, p. 60.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

<sup>18</sup> Thus the paraphrasing of Rosa Luxemburg by Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, pp. 433-434.

<sup>19</sup> Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*, p. 69.

Luxemburg felt that the Bolsheviks were imposing a new system from above rather than building it from below:<sup>20</sup>

‘Lenin is completely mistaken in the means he employs. Decree, dictatorial force of the factory overseer, draconic penalties, rule by terror, all these things are but palliatives. The only way to rebirth is the school of public life itself, the most unlimited, the broadest democracy and public opinion. It is rule by terror which demoralizes.’

J. P. Nettl is probably right to say that Rosa Luxemburg did not mind ‘in the last resort’ whether the Bolsheviks maintained themselves or not, and that this perhaps was the major difference between her and them.<sup>21</sup> The reason for this was that Rosa Luxemburg was far more afraid of a deformed revolution than an unsuccessful revolution. The first might become a terrible problem for the international socialist movement; the second would simply be followed by new revolutionary initiatives. Rosa Luxemburg understood Lenin’s organizational abilities and objects and, with her political insights and intuition and on the basis of what she knew about the situation, extrapolated them to their inevitable dictatorial consequences. In another historic and even prophetic passage she writes:<sup>22</sup>

‘With the repression of political life in the land as a whole, life in the Soviets must also become more crippled ... life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element. Public life gradually falls asleep. The few dozen party leaders of inexhaustible energy and boundless experience direct and rule. Among them only a dozen outstanding heads do the leading and an elite of the working class is invited from time to time to meetings where they are to applaud the speeches of the leaders, and to approve proposed resolutions unanimously – at bottom then a clique affair. A dictatorship to be sure; not the dictatorship of the proletariat, however, but only a dictatorship of a handful of politicians in the bourgeois sense ... yes, we can go even further: such conditions must inevitably cause a brutalization of public life.’

Rosa Luxemburg may have believed that the Bolsheviks had made a beginning with the international socialist revolution, but she was sure that they could not meet the challenge of building a new society. The conditions of Russian politics and society were too harsh and backward for anything more positive to emerge from the Bolshevik regime. She writes at the end of her manuscript: ‘Lenin and Trotsky and their friends were the *first* who went ahead as an example to the pro-

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>21</sup> Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 434.

<sup>22</sup> Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution*, pp. 76-77.

letariat of the world ... But in Russia the problem could only be posed. It could not be solved there.' Rosa Luxemburg's pamphlet on the Russian revolution was primarily an examination of the basic propositions of revolution, and the only glimpse of how she envisaged the future. Unlike Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg did not accept a difference between party life and eventual public life, between party and post-revolutionary society. For her the socialist revolution was nothing more than the expansion of socialism from the party to the whole society. While Rosa Luxemburg, in spite of all her revolutionary strivings and radical convictions, remained anchored in the Second International as far as her democratic and socialist openness was concerned, Lenin evolved a theory of party discipline and organization which he put into effect with every means at his disposal. Only the party mattered and if it was properly organized, it could afford every change of tactic, survive every manoeuvre, and could fortify or discard at will every single institution in society. The Bolshevik view of society did not change much before and after the revolution, except in terms of the party's power: there was 'we', the party, and 'it', the society.<sup>23</sup> This was clearly not the view and not the perspective of Rosa Luxemburg, who saw the working-class party as being in opposition to capitalist society but could not imagine a socialist society in the making in which there was a similar opposition between party and society.

Rosa Luxemburg has been described as a 'socialist with a human face.'<sup>24</sup> The context to this is somewhat different from the Czechoslovak context of 1968 when a similar expression was used, but there are similarities in terms of the complex interpretation of socialist history. A crucial issue in this complex socialist history is the divide between Social Democrats and Communists, or between democratic and authoritarian socialists. The place of Rosa Luxemburg in this divide is controversial, because she identified with revolutionary socialism but not with Bolshevism. The Communist-Social Democratic divide principally had to do with the Bolshevik seizure of power in direct opposition to democratic legality and majority opinion, as expressed in the elections to the Constituent Assembly a few weeks after the Bolshevik take-over in Petrograd in the name of a new authority: Soviets of workers, peasants and soldiers. It became a matter of principle for Communists to affirm, and for Social Democrats to deny, that a socialist revolution could achieve its aims only if it dispensed with bourgeois legality and parliamentary institutions, freedom of the press and the existence of rival political parties. The Bolshevik assertions were seriously weakened by Rosa Luxemburg

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<sup>23</sup> Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 435-436.

<sup>24</sup> Beverly G. Merrick, 'Rosa Luxemburg: A Socialist With a Human Face', in: *Feminist Theory Website*, hosted by the Center for Digital Discourse and Culture at Virginia Tech University (1998).

in her September 1918 manuscript. This happened shortly before she became the co-founder of the German Communist Party, which made it more difficult for Leninists – especially from 1922 when the manuscript was published – to claim the authority of Marx for what Lenin, Trotsky and the other Bolshevik leaders did in 1917-1918. They dissolved the recently elected Constituent Assembly, in which the Bolsheviks could not hope to gain a majority, and imposed other measures which marginalized and suppressed other political parties. The Social Revolutionaries had become the major winner of the elections, a party which represented the interests of the peasantry. Lenin claimed afterwards that the Social Revolutionaries no longer existed as a party, their left wing having made common cause with the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks, indeed, always had their sophistry at hand to justify this or that step of their power politics. However, ever since that moment in January 1918, which symbolized the Bolsheviks' unashamed usurpation of power, the Communist movement had to explain why 'socialist democracy' must necessarily take the form of one-party dictatorship.<sup>25</sup> According to George Lichtheim, Rosa Luxemburg warned that socialism without democracy was bound to turn into a monstrosity.<sup>26</sup> This is true notwithstanding all her illusions about socialism, idealism, and the role of power in politics.

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<sup>25</sup> Lichtheim, *Europe in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 141-142; O.H. Radkey, *The Election to the Russian Constituent Assembly of 1917* (London, 1950); L. Schapiro, *The Origin of the Communist Autocracy* (London, 1955).

<sup>26</sup> Lichtheim, *Europe in the Twentieth Century*, p. 389.