

~~/~~THE SISYPHIAN LABOR~~/~~  
THE SOCIALIST 'MORAL IMPERATIVE' IN THE  
LIFE AND WRITINGS OF ROSA LUXEMBERG

by

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## INTRODUCTION

At the age of seventeen, Rosa Luxemburg was already engaged in revolutionary activities in her native Poland. Ten years later she completed her doctorate and had emerged as the chief ideologue of Polish social democracy. A decade later her deteriorated corpse was dragged from Berlin's Landwehr Canal where it had languished for three months after her brutal murder in January, 1919. Rosa Luxemburg -- born into a middle-class Polish Jewish family in Russian Poland, a diminutive woman who suffered from a slight deformity of the hip -- is best known for her role in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and as founder of the Polish (and later Lithuanian) Social Democratic Party (SDKPiL), the Gruppe Internationale, the Spartacusbund, and the German Communist Party.

This study will proceed chronologically. Rosa Luxemburg's career provides an ideal vehicle for the study of German, Polish, and Russian socialism in the epoch-changing first two decades of the twentieth-century. As foremost contemporary critic of Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky, of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, Luxemburg's writing serves as a probe into the ideological soul of Marxism in the period both preceding and following the First World War and the Russian and German revolutions. An orthodox dialectician, Rosa Luxemburg stood for a purified strain of Marxism: doctrinaire without dogma; romantic yet attentive to material conditions. Above all, Luxemburg defended the 'moral imperative' -- the notion that Marxism provided the path toward a more just and humane social structure based upon the spirit of community and shared values. Unwilling to compromise with those

who would accept the expedient, be it Bernsteinian Revisionism or Lenin's authoritarianism, Luxemburg sought to update Marx's critique of capitalism in the light of radically altered economic and political conditions. For Rosa Luxemburg, socialism was the highest expression of democracy.

Luxemburg built her philosophical speculations not only upon Marx but also upon Immanuel Kant. The Prussian thinker maintained that freedom was a universal law, a product of "practical reason," not theoretical metaphysics. Although the individual was born free, he was restrained from attaining his absolute freedom by the authority of the state and his own inability to think critically. The public laws of the state and man's inclination to place sensual (Gefühl) will before freedom undermined freedom in practice. Kant maintained that man was driven to moral perfection but before freedom could be achieved, the individual had to exercise his free will. Man must create a universal legal order based upon the application of moral laws to formal laws. Only when the 'moral imperative' triumphed could a moral society emerge. This moral society would place community over public law and individual liberties over legal obligations. As reason played a determinate role in the actions of individuals, morality would become a universal law governing the actions of all.<sup>1</sup>

Rosa Luxemburg's writings were imbued with the strains of Kantian critical method and Marx's materialistic empiricism. Her contribution to scientific Marxism is twofold. First, she built upon Marx's analysis of the structure and impact of capitalism



with the view of updating Das Kapital. Second, as the capitalist system continued to evolve, Luxemburg attempted to evaluate the phenomenon. She demonstrated before Lenin that imperialism fueled the Second Industrial Revolution (1870-1914). Her writings were a call to action. The revolutionary vanguard envisioned by Luxemburg was composed of acting individuals in full possession of free will. Luxemburg believed that through revolution society would be liberated from the base instruments of capitalism ("labor theory of value," "iron law of wages," "the invisible hand") and come to be predicated upon rational considerations. Like Kant, she believed the 'moral imperative' was the foundation of moral society; like Marx, she maintained that practice grows from the individual's unwillingness to accept powerlessness.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this paper is to extract from her writings an integrated analysis of the role played by Luxemburg in the socialist movements of Germany and Poland during her brief but event-filled career as professional revolutionist. A clear picture of Luxemburg is difficult to attain. In her own day, the conservative German press ridiculed her, disparagingly calling her 'Red Rosa.' On the other extreme, the Soviet and East German Communist Parties have consistently denounced her writing as heretical.<sup>3</sup> Despite the best efforts of both the right and the left to discredit her, her words and deeds have not been forgotten. Her writings historically exerted influence in Poland, Germany, and Russia, and her polemics enjoyed a renaissance among unionized workers in Paris and 'New Left' students in the United States in the 1960s as well as in the

leftist movements in present-day West Germany. As her biographer Peter Nettl points out: "Nearly every dissident group from official communism -- German, French, or Russian -- at once laid special and exclusive claim to the possession of Rosa Luxemburg's spirit."<sup>4</sup> Clearly Rosa Luxemburg is one of the greatest figures produced by Marxism both in terms of practical leadership and, more importantly, as theoretician. The fact that Luxemburg's writing continues to be devotedly admired or vehemently scorned is indication enough that her visions of a moral, democratic socialism retain their currency more than sixty years after her death.

## CHAPTER ONE THE ZURICH PERIOD

As a teenager Luxemburg was a member of the moribund Proletariat party, the earliest socialist party in Poland. Forced to flee Warsaw at the age of 19, she chose to go to Zurich, to begin her career as a professional revolutionist. An obvious choice, not only was Zurich one of the very few cities with a university open to women, it was also the center of the Russo-Polish socialist emigre community and served as the seat of Nikolai Bukarin, the 'Father of Russian Marxism.'

Luxemburg entered the university in 1890 in the faculty of philosophy but two years later transferred to the law faculty. She remained there until 1898 when she earned her doctorate by a dissertation, The Industrial Development of Poland, a brilliant economic analysis of the evolution of Polish industry. In it she cogently argued that Poland's industrialization was artificial, a result of Poland's integration into the Russian Empire with its huge market and considerable capital pool.<sup>5</sup> It was also in Zurich that she met Leo Jogiches, a fellow Polish Jew and socialist. Jogiches, Rosa's lover in an oddly monogamous relationship which was punctuated by long periods of separation and estrangement, became the most dominant figure in her most private personal life and certainly the most influential politically during her Zurich period (1890-1898).

The university occupied only a small segment of her time in Zurich. In 1892, emigre Polish socialists formed the Polish Socialist Party (PPS). Although essentially Marxist in program, the PPS sought to coalesce around the cause of Polish

nationalism. Within months of the founding of the PPS, a dissenting socialist paper emerged in Paris, Sprawa Robotnicza (The Workers' Cause) -- the business manager being Jogiches, the chief contributor, Rosa Luxemburg. This newspaper provided a vehicle for Luxemburg's precipitous rise into the world of international socialism and allowed her to establish herself as a leading interpreter of Marx.

Luxemburg rejected the PPS's attempt at constructing nationalist socialism. Recognizing that Poland's proletariat was in an embryonic stage of class consciousness, she advocated the development of a trade-union movement which would not cooperate with the bourgeois nationalists but one in which the workers would act as "the mid-wife of socialism."<sup>6</sup> Although denied a mandate to represent herself as a spokesperson for the Polish working class in opposition to the PPS at the Third Congress of the Socialist International in August 1893 in Zurich, the twenty-three year old Luxemburg ignored the lack of a mandate and made her first striking appearance on the stage of international socialism. This was followed two years later by her first pamphlet entitled Niepodległa Polska i Sprawa Robotnicza (Independent Poland and the Worker's Cause) which represented her initial cohesive statement on the Polish national question.

In the meantime, Jogiches and Luxemburg, along with Julian Marchlewski and Adolf Warszawski, had formed the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland (SDKP) -- the use of the term 'kingdom of Poland' clearly indicated that the party strictly delimited their activities to Congress Poland, that is, Russian Poland.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike the great socialist parties of western Europe, the emigre Zurich-centered Polish and Russian parties were top-heavy with leaders with almost no rank-and-file.<sup>8</sup> This had two effects: firstly, since there was little need for organization and little opportunity to utilize tactics, the emigre parties could concentrate their energies upon polemics; secondly, as they published in Polish, western authorities did not suppress their presses thereby allowing theoreticians to write without having to couch their language to deceive the censors. In such an environment, Rosa Luxemburg was given free reign to hone her command of ideology as well as to perfect her already brilliant and inflammatory writing style.

Seeking to exploit the national issue as a platform to establish her credentials as a first-rank ideologue, Luxemburg carried the argument to the Kautsky edited Neu Zeit and the Sachsische Arbeiterzeitung, the leading papers of socialist Germany. Her well argued articles, heavily laden with quotations from Marx, brought the young Polish upstart into public polemical battles not only with Kautsky but also Plekhanov and Wilhelm Liebknecht as well -- the major figures of European social democracy.

Now representing a legitimate party, the SDKP, Luxemburg could not be denied a mandate at the 1896 London congress. Making the best of her opportunities to speak, she hammered away at the Polish national question, in the process drawing the German and Austrian parties into the fray. Soon both the Germans and Austrians were compelled to question their own attitudes towards the respective Polish wings of their own

parties. Luxemburg's splitting tactics did succeed in dividing the consensus of the International and, to a degree, undermined the cohesion of the German and Austrian parties.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, so successful were Luxemburg's tactics that among the members of the London International, Polendebatten (Polish Debates) came to be a synonym for disagreement over marginal matters. Yet, as a result of these debates, Rosa Luxemburg became widely known and grudgingly respected, even among the highest circles of German socialism. Coupled with the creation of the SDKPiL<sup>10</sup> in 1899, this greatly increased her stature and most foreign observers now recognized Luxemburg as the undisputed theoretical leader of the Polish and Lithuanian parties. Thus, at the age of twenty-eight she had attained respectability.

## CHAPTER 2

### LIFE IN BERLIN: THE REVISIONIST DEBATES

Just as Zurich was an ideal location to launch her career as theoretician for the Polish socialist movement, so Berlin was the place to consolidate her recently won, although tenuous, place among the ideologues of European socialism. Berlin -- nerve center of the all powerful SPD, the envy of all the other socialist parties -- had an irresistible attraction to the ambitious Luxemburg.

Despite Bismarck's anti-socialist laws, the SPD and its trade-union affiliates continued to grow throughout the 1880s. During their period of illegality, the SPD did not become a conspiratorial party with its headquarters abroad but instead remained inside Germany claiming legitimacy and organizing for the eventual withdrawal of the edict.<sup>11</sup> When the withdrawal came in 1890, the SPD celebrated by the issuance of its famous Erfurt Programme which subscribed to the notion that the collapse of capitalism and the subsequent creation of socialism was inevitable. The program also contained a formal affirmation of faith in the principles of Marxism as interpreted by Kautsky as well as a tactical program. Drawn up principally by Bernstein, the program recognized that the collapse of capitalism was not at hand. In distinguishing the 'final goal' -- socialist revolution -- from the 'immediate tasks' -- trade-unionism and participation in the electoral system -- the revolutionary nature of the party was purposely left vague so as not to provide the government with a pretext to drive the SPD underground. Therefore, the dichotomy of the 'minimum' and 'maximum' program was introduced which laid

the roots for a multiplicity of theoretical interpretations that culminated in the divisive revisionist controversy of 1898-1900.

The SPD cultivated its image as the political pariah of Wilhelmine Germany. The line between the socialist party and the state provided the SPD with its reputation as the enemy of capitalistic society. Behind this exclusiveness, both party leadership and the rank-and-file could proclaim their rhetoric about the dialectic and concentrate upon practical matters such as increasing their representation in the Reichstag. Illustrating the German talent for organization, the SPD created a state within a state. The bureaucracy of the party mirrored that of the Kaiser's state -- from local officials up to the Berlin executive committee -- in order that its organization could substitute for the institutions of the state with the coming of the revolution. Unlike the eastern European emigre parties that valued theory over tactics, the SPD basically was nondialectical with a deterministic, Darwinian world view founded upon the faith that the triumph of the proletarian revolution was inexorable and that it would proceed along the path outlined by Marx. Theory was galvanized into dogma and SPD organization became an end in itself, a substitute for revolution.

This is not to suggest that the rhetoric of the SPD was not revolutionary. Yet its actions, governed by the constant phobia of the leadership that its organization might be destroyed if the Kaiser's government was provoked, were guided by practical bourgeois parliamentarianism.<sup>12</sup> Nothing better illustrates this 'iron law of oligarchy' and complacency than, when at the height



of the revisionist debate, in response to a demand that Bernstein be expelled from the party, Bebel wrote to Kautsky: "To have the Party congress solemnly declare that it stands for social revolution -- that would really be all we need."<sup>13</sup>

For Bernstein, the Erfurt dichotomy, which he helped to formulate, remained the central issue for the SPD to resolve. He maintained that without a theory, the party's program was like a ship without a helmsman. Bebel and Liebknecht believed that practical actions, the 'immediate tasks' of the Erfurt Programme, should continue without any interference from the theoretical scholasticism of those who expounded a revolutionary doctrine.<sup>14</sup> Still in exile in London and doubtlessly influenced by the Fabians, Bernstein attempted to find a unity between theory and practice. He was not seeking to dismantle the Marxian philosophy nor was he trying to create a new philosophy. Rather, it was Bernstein's intention to critique Marxism in the light of a half-century's socio-economic and political progress thereby revising the dialectic to suit an altered environment.<sup>15</sup>

Bernstein saw the dialectic essentially as a "historicist's prediction" of the future extrapolated from empirical observations gathered in the 1840s and the subsequent two decades. Pointing to the remarkable adaptability of capitalism Bernstein saw no likelihood that the bourgeois control of the 'means of the productive forces' was anywhere near collapse as Marx had predicted. In fact, in Bernstein, quite the opposite picture is sketched. Moreover, Bernstein viewed socialism as much a moral force as a dialectical one. He defined socialism as the means to a more equitable redistribution of wealth and

opportunity. These ends, he maintained, could be achieved by the exertion of electoral pressure within the existing system rather than either in the opportunism of the SPD leadership or in the resort to violent revolution.

The first attacks from inside Germany against Bernstein's Neu Zeit articles were those of Parvus, the editor of the Sachsische Arbeiterzeitung. In the revisionist debates which were to dominate the SPD for the next three years, Rosa Luxemburg recognized her great opportunity. In a series of articles which appeared in the Leipziger Volkszeitung, she supported Parvus' call for a rejection of Bernstein's heresy. On the surface, her attacks upon Bernstein were based upon calculated self-interest, the controversy allowing her to strengthen her position as a leading interpreter of Marx. Rosa Luxemburg firmly was committed to the revolution and her analysis of Marx illustrates not only a breadth of knowledge of the nature of the dialectic method but also indicates that she was an orthodox, doctrinaire Marxist.

To Luxemburg, the dialectic was the essence of scientific Marxism.<sup>16</sup> She fully accepted Marx's concept of 'totality.' That is, by recognizing that history is a process, the analyst could proceed to understand the different factors which constitute the chain of events which compose that historical situation and trace the line of development. To Luxemburg, the notion that social democracy could have a meaningful validity distinct from its causal relationship to the dialectic was anathema. Bernstein and his supporters were viewed by Luxemburg as vulgar empiricists who divorced facts from reality in an

attempt to distort the applicability of Marx's writing to conditions at the turn of the century. In Luxemburg's opinion, their revisions were based upon a faulty comprehension of the dialectical process and therefore, Bernstein and his supporters could not claim to be scientific Marxists.

Bernstein's book, The Presuppositions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy, appeared in 1899. Rosa Luxemburg hastened to reply to it, writing the articles which would become the second half of Social Reform or Revolution,<sup>17</sup> her most important contribution to the revisionist debate and the first, and perhaps the greatest, of her works dealing with Marxian analysis upon which her reputation now rests.

In his denial of violence and advocacy of reform, Bernstein was clearly departing from classic Marxism. Luxemburg's view was diametrically different. She saw Bernstein's theory as defensive and equivocal which legitimized, under the guise of a Marxian doctrine, the opportunism and reformism of the SPD conservatives. "Naturally those who only want to chase after practical achievements," she wrote, "soon develop a desire to liberate themselves, i.e. he separates practice from theory to make himself free of it."<sup>18</sup> Typical of her bitter writing style, Luxemburg simultaneously utilized these writings to attack both the revisionism of Bernstein and the opportunism of the SPD leadership. Instead of pandering to the voters and playing down the appeal to revolution, the SPD should emphasise ...

the closest possible connection of capitalist society as a whole with the insoluble contradictions in which it is enmeshed and which must lead to the final explosion, a collapse at which we shall be both executioner and the executor who must

liquidate bankrupt society.<sup>19</sup>

The distinction between bourgeois and Marxist politics was that the former was practical in the sense that it had no scientific meaning; the latter was practical by being part of a theoretical necessity. Any attempt to relate practical activity only to its immediate purposes, and abstract it from the causal pressure of necessity, was an irrevocable step out of socialism into bourgeois politics. Bernstein had removed himself from the socialist camp, at least in Luxemburg's opinion -- Bernstein was nothing more than a radical petit bourgeois democrat.<sup>20</sup>

Luxemburg's critique of Bernstein's view of capitalism was standard Marxism. She attacked his contention that credit-capitalism reduces economic crises by pointing out that the development of finance-capitalism resulted in periodic depressions. While minor crises may have been reduced, the evolution of finance-capitalism had a net effect of accentuating economic chaos. She went on to point out that, according to the dialectic of capitalism, finance-capitalism must diminish and disappear before bourgeois society would collapse. The numbers of capitalists would decrease, periodically "mown down like so much ripe corn," absorbed by larger capitalists. Pointing to the actual economic conditions of Europe in the second half of the 19th century, periods of high profit invariable follow periodic depressions as in 1873 and 1893.<sup>21</sup> From Marx's Das Kapital she quoted:

The conditions of production demand the employment of capital on a large scale. They likewise require its centralization, that is, a devouring of small capitalists by the great capitalists and decapitalization of the former.<sup>22</sup>

In the political realm, Luxemburg saw Bernstein's faith in positive social reform as merely a result of the political manipulations of the bourgeoisie. Rather than make revolution unnecessary it made it essential. Bourgeois reformism was based upon law and laws could be altered to suit the political expediencies.

Instead of resting on laws the level of wages is ... governed by economic factors .... Thus the basic conditions of capitalistic class domination cannot be altered by reforms of the law like their original transformation into [the present] bourgeois conditions, since they had not themselves been brought about by such laws in the first place.<sup>23</sup>

Extra-legal bourgeois domination made revolution, rather than reformist policies, logically necessary.

This line of logic is original to Luxemburg. She fundamentally she departed from the more orthodox Marxian analysis of bourgeois liberalism as being the legal and constitutional reproduction of bourgeois class domination. Instead of basing herself on the formal notion that bourgeois society was expressed by its laws and that revolution was necessary because any change in the laws would be resisted, she introduced the novel idea that the fundamental nature of bourgeois society and its main tools of oppression were extra-legal -- and therefore incapable of being changed by reform, even if that appeared politically practicable at a given historical juncture.

Having attacked Bernstein's revisionism, she went on to emphasise the essential relationship between 'correct' theory and practice. Correct theory postulates revolution. Therefore,

everything Social Democracy does must aim at facilitating revolution. By asserting this relationship, Luxemburg characterized practical activities in a manner which relegated them to contributing factors only, without independent validity. Theory was the life blood of practice.

Luxemburg then discussed the position of trade-unionism. As might be expected, Bernstein placed a great deal of faith in the power of the large German trade unions to exert political pressure on the regimes, both federal and regional, to force genuine reforms. Luxemburg followed the classic Marxist notion that the role of the trade unions must be limited. The 'iron law of wages' could not be successfully altered by trade unionism and practical politics since the degradation of the wage slaves was postulated by Marx. Even if success was won, which Luxemburg saw no likelihood of happening, it would result in a shift back to pre-capitalist conditions which was contrary to the dialectic. Standard Marxism postulated the increased impoverishment of the proletariat; the theory of the growing crisis of finance-capitalism; and the inevitability of the capitalist collapse. This being the necessary prerequisite for the creation of class conflict, unemployment and economic dislocation were necessities in order to stimulate further class antagonisms. Her unfortunate label of the trade union movement as being the "labour of Sisyphus" sparked much adverse comment, particularly by practical-minded trade unionists who became anti-Luxemburgist as a matter of faith. Generally, her critics, not only in the trade union movement but in the highest levels of the SPD as well,

were so busy reacting against the vehemence of her attacks that they largely ignored much of her more original analysis.

She moved on to consider the question of revolution in which she stayed faithful to the Marxian theory. Generally the only thing unique in her analysis of revolution was her insistence that revolution was a lengthy process. Luxemburg denied the validity of the single decisive upheaval when she wrote:

An enormous upheaval like the change of society from a capitalist to a socialist order is inconceivable in one hit through one victorious strike on the part of the proletariat.... The socialist upheaval predicates a long and bitter struggle.<sup>24</sup>

Not only is this a barb aimed at the optimistic among the revisionists, reformists, and opportunists in the SPD, but it clearly foreshadows Rosa Luxemburg's opposition to Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolution.

In relation to the movement toward revolution, Luxemburg then turned her attention to the nature of liberal bourgeois democracy as it existed in western Europe, particularly in Germany. She saw militarism and the naval race as symptomatic of the decline of bourgeois democracy, thus a contradiction to Bernstein's belief in the growth of liberal democracy. Pointing to the 'doctrine of class consciousness' as the nexus which linked theory and practice, Luxemburg viewed the petit bourgeois as the carriers of nationalism and liberalism. In order to co-opt the petit bourgeois into the revolution, they must be made aware that, in the end, they too would be devoured by the grande bourgeois -- the finance capitalists. She maintained that although the petit bourgeois were then the successors of



liberalism, they eventually would rise above their Lumpenbourgeoisie mentality and destroy liberalism. Portraying an ambivalence toward them Luxemburg wrote that the "realization of Socialism does not predicate the absolute disappearance of ... the petit bourgeois."<sup>25</sup> For Luxemburg, only theory could convert the middle class into the vanguard of revolution.

Above all, Rosa Luxemburg, in her anti-revisionist articles, hammered away at the conceptual framework of theory and practice. She believed that the doctrine of class consciousness was the lynch-pin of causality. Practical actions, such as trade-unionism, only served to obscure theory -- even if the net result of these practical actions were to promote class consciousness. Her aim was to up-grade and expound theory -- practice was the agent of theory. Rosa Luxemburg again attacked the SPD for its theoretical softness and opportunism.

For Social Democracy an unbreakable connection exists between social reform and social revolution, in that their struggle for social reform is the means and social upheaval the purpose.<sup>26</sup>

While discounting the relevance of practice, much of her writing, particularly in Social Reform or Revolution is concerned with questions of practical policy.

Concurrently, she was also engaged in a discussion regarding German militarism. These writings appear in Social Reform or Revolution as an appendix. Again, she took the opportunity to attack the opportunist trade unions who generally were supportive of increases in the defense budgets.

The labourer might avoid a reduction of his wages through the existence of the military budget but he loses to that extent his opportunity for improving his lot 'permanently' by



building up the very force which will be used  
to prevent him fighting for that improvement.<sup>27</sup>

Short sighted practical aims, in this case increased numbers of defense related jobs which would improve the immediate lot of the workers of Germany, resulted not only in the delegation of theory into a secondary role but postponed socialism.

The manifest motivation for writing the articles which together comprised Social Reform or Revolution was, aside from seeking to improve her standing in the SPD, to turn the intellectual dispute into a political problem. Rosa Luxemburg fully recognized that she could not gain power inside the SPD simply because she was hamstrung by a set of insurmountable disadvantages: she was young, Polish, a female, Jewish, and more importantly, she was an ambitious, brilliant ideologue whose polemics were not temporized by either practical political concerns or by personal affiliations.

One of the key strengths the SDKP was its "peer group"<sup>27</sup> quality in which a group of young revolutionaries bonded together to zealously work toward revolution. In the intellectual hot-house atmosphere of Zurich, unincumbered by questions of tactics, Luxemburg could exclusively focus her mind on questions of theory. The leadership of the SPD, on the other hand, thought in terms of organization and practical politics. The vehemence which Bernstein's writings evoked was due to the fact that, essentially, he merely was stating the truth -- the SPD was a "democratic socialist party of reform."<sup>29</sup> Bebel and Liebknecht alone were old enough to have distant memories of the last revolutionary episode, the Paris Commune of 1871; Kautsky

and Bernstein, like Bebel and Liebknecht, were among the select few who had personal ties with either Marx or Engels. The rest of the SPD learned their revolution strictly from the writings of Marx but, as Luxemburg was sardonically fond to point out, few read anything beyond the Communist Manifesto. The SPD leadership was old enough to perceive, at least among themselves, that they were the contemporaries of Marx and Engels and therefore their inheritors. Theory, fixed to the point of being fossilized, ceased to be the motive force behind the glacial SPD.

Luxemburg infused what Trotsky would term "the Russian method" into the German socialist scene -- the idea that action was of a superior order than practical politics. For Luxemburg, the role of theory was central since it alone provided the postulates which fuelled the process toward revolution but beyond that, only action could succeed. Her views were based, in large part, upon her experiences in Zurich where personalities only served as symbols for polemical ideas. Personal dislikes did not enter the equation since everything was predicated upon the revolution. This was exactly opposite of the nature of German social democracy where personalities meant everything with the result being that, despite the outward appearance of unanimity, the SPD coalesced around personalities. This is reflected in the Bernstein debates where Kautsky, Bebel and Liebknecht all privately broke with Bernstein. Yet Bernstein was not forced out of the party and questions of doctrine were ignored at the Stuttgart Congress in order that the appearance of SPD solidarity could be maintained for fear of further factionalization which could only erode the all important organization. It was for this

very reason that Social Reform or Revolution was so explosive since Luxemburg was not part of the cult of personalities. Her writings were enlivened by a distinct sense of purpose. To her, Bernsteinism was a cancer which threatened the teleology of the dialectic. The immediate enemy was not finance-capitalism but the revisionists whose philosophy undermined the purity of theory. Not only was the enemy at home, the enemy was 'us' -- the SPD.

Kautsky, the unquestioned spokesman of the SPD on polemical matters, attacked Bernstein in a work entitled Bernstein and the Social Democratic Programme (1899). Defining the role of theory, essentially all he did was to uphold the Erfurt Programme of 1891. Luxemburg's work clearly is the superior. A reassertion of classical Marxism with references to the needs of the SPD, the totality of Social Reform or Revolution and its inflammatory quality gave the impression of something new. More importantly, and that which elevates Social Reform or Revolution into the front-rank of classic Marxist works, is the fact that more contemporaries found their way to Marxism through this, her first German work, than through any other work of the period.<sup>30</sup>

Aware of the German antipathy towards Poles and the liabilities imposed upon her by her sex and her nominal religion, Rosa Luxemburg recognized she would never be anything but an outsider in the SPD. Rather than seek power, she instead sought to influence the party through her polemics. Although she discussed the importance of mass movements, she was a very private person who led a remarkably bourgeois life style.

Further, by orientation, she was an ideologue, not an organizer. Moreover, the hostility she evoked in her caustic writings forced her to pull away from the SPD establishment and she resigned herself to the fact that her influence would have to be projected towards the center of power rather than from inside it.

At the height of the Bernstein debates, Luxemburg inherited the editorship of the Sachsisch Arbeiterzeitung. Owing to her sex, she encountered nothing but obstruction by the staff. In her writing she took issue against Vorwarts, the SPD's official organ, in the process assaulting the party line and therefore Kautsky. Her abusive articles so alienated the party faithful, she was forced to resign. In this way, the first attempt at participation in the SPD structure ended in defeat. On October 30, 1901, she took over the Leipziger Volkszeitung after Bruno Schonlank's death. Disregarding Bebel's advice to stop her attacks against both the left and right, Luxemburg's editorials prompted a storm of protest inside the party and outside. Once again she was forced to resign. These two failures illustrated that her temperament and writing style were ill suited for institutional politics and there after she would remain outside the hierarchical SPD organization.

These setbacks notwithstanding, by 1905 she had reached the pinnacle of her influence in the SPD. Although frequently in disagreement, Rosa enjoyed the support of Kautsky whom she was able to greatly influence. Further, she had long since established herself as one of the most powerful voices in the party both in terms of Polish and Russian affairs and, more importantly, as an interpreter of Marx. By 1904 she was the

acknowledged victor of the revisionist debates and Social Reform or Revolution was at the zenith of its impact. At the Amsterdam International (1904) she won the respect of Jean Jaures despite being the primary object of her polemical attacks. She even attained the greatest honor the Kaiser's government could bestow upon a socialist -- she was deemed sufficiently dangerous to be given a jail term. Rosa Luxemburg had arrived.

### CHAPTER THREE THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION OF 1905 AND THE MASS STRIKE

On January 22, 1905, tsarist troops fired upon a procession of workers in St. Petersburg sparking what Lenin characterized as "the dress rehearsal" for the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the Russian Revolution of 1905. The spontaneous nature of the revolution, which began as a series of mass strikes, caught European social democrats unprepared. Ill and unfit to travel, Luxemburg, as the chief expert on eastern European affairs, daily wrote articles in which she sought to stoke the flames of German worker radicalism. Luxemburg viewed the revolution-mass strike as a builder of a mood or climate in which the class consciousness of the proletariat could be forged and by which the revolutionary leadership would emerge.

The Russian Revolution forced the SPD to move toward the left. That is not to say that German socialists eagerly took up arms, but the SPD did illustrate a greater inclination to discuss positive actions. While the leadership displayed a disposition towards radical planning, the rank and file pressed for economic

and political concessions from the regime. At the Jena Congress of 1905, a vague resolution was carried concerning the utility of a general strike in Germany. Despite a rejection by the trade-unionists, who frequently repeated Bebel's old phrase that "general strikes are general nonsense," the Jena resolution was the first official policy statement made by the SPD concerning the use of the general strike -- one which Luxemburg refused to allow to die.

Partly owing to the jeers of her trade-unionist enemies and partly because she was a 'romantic,' Luxemburg left for Warsaw on December 28, 1905. By this time the tsarist authorities were in a position to launch a counter offensive against the revolutionary parties. Fired by active participation in the long awaited revolution, she often worked around the clock writing, editing, and publishing, sometimes with a gun literally pointed at bourgeois printers. On March 4, 1906 the inevitable happened, she was arrested and imprisoned in the Warsaw Citadel. After some weeks in prison, Luxemburg was freed on bond and allowed to move to Russian Finland where she spent a few months in Kuokkala, there meeting Lenin. While in Finland she was approached by the Hamburg branch of the SPD to write a pamphlet regarding the theoretical possibilities of the use of the mass strike. Luxemburg seized the opportunity and by drawing upon both her recent experiences and long dormant thoughts on the topic she wrote her most important statement on practical tactical questions, The Mass Strike, Party, and Trade Unions.

The Russian Revolution was a catalyst to Luxemburg's

thinking. In evaluating the lessons to be drawn from the Revolution of 1905, Luxemburg attempted to illustrate the efficacy of the use of the strike weapon to the SPD. She came to see the mass strike as the specific weapon of the proletariat in times of revolutionary ferment: "In reality the mass strike does not produce the revolution, but the revolution produces the mass strike."<sup>31</sup> The experiences of Russia and Poland illustrated that Germany lacked the spontaneity and energy to move from preparation to participation. Equally clear to her was that Russian 'will' was no substitute for a class conscious and militant proletariat. In Marxian terms, Russia had not attained the level of socio-economic maturity required for the proletarian revolution. While Germany was ready for revolution, the masses were apathetic. "In order to carry through a direct political struggle as a mass, the proletariat must first be assembled as a mass," she maintained.<sup>32</sup> In Russia, the revolution awakened and mobilized the proletariat thus permitting their organization to proceed largely independently of the formal parties. She argued the role of the mass strike was one of self education and self organization for the proletariat. Summing up her evaluations of the significance of the new development of the strike weapon by the Russian proletariat:

The mass strike is thus shown to be not a specifically Russian product springing from absolutism but a universal form of the proletarian class struggle resulting from the present stage of capitalist development and class relations.<sup>33</sup>

The Russian experience demonstrated to Luxemburg that the mass strike was "not a crafty method discovered by subtle



reasoning for the purpose of making the struggle more effective."<sup>34</sup> In fact, she pointed out that the movement had not been accelerated by the various party elites. In order to comprehend the forces which sparked the revolution one must not engage in "subjective criticism of the mass strike from the standpoint of what is desirable, but only by the objective investigation of the sources of the mass strike from the standpoint of what is historically inevitable."<sup>35</sup> Still later in the pamphlet, she once again addressed the spontaneous quality of the mass strike stating for the benefit of the German workers that the SPD leadership was unable "to fix beforehand the cause and the moment [for] the mass strikes in Germany ... because it is not in its power to bring about historical situations by resolution at party congresses."<sup>36</sup> The party's role was "to make clear the political tendencies, when once they appear, and to formulate them as resolute and consistent tactics."<sup>37</sup>

The Mass Strike illustrated Luxemburg's developing theory of revolution, a view fundamentally different from Lenin's. In 1903 Lenin outlined his organizational theory in a pamphlet entitled What Is To Be Done?. He established three determinants which must be present before any revolution could succeed in Russia: 1) the continued existence of the absolutist state structure; 2) the need to construct first a bourgeois democracy since feudal Russia had first to pass into the capitalist stage of development before any true measure of socialism could be constructed; and, 3) the creation of the revolutionary elite to educate the mass into an acceptance of a class consciousness and to thereby hasten



the proletarian revolution through the use of actions which were aimed to undermine the authority and the legitimacy of the tsarist regime. According to Lenin, a centralized organization would serve as a bulwark against the opportunist tendencies which emasculated the western parties. In the Russian context, opportunism was a result of the "backward political condition of Russian society."<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Lenin believed that without the active pull of the revolutionary elite, working class conditions were doomed to a vicious circle of impotence and, correspondingly, that Russian class consciousness would never rise above trade union activity.

Luxemberg's reply to Lenin, solicited by the Mensheviks, first appeared in Neu Zeit during the winter of 1903-1904 and predated The Mass Strike. For Rosa Luxemburg, class consciousness was essentially a problem of friction between Social Democracy and society. Friction was the end result of immature class consciousness, i.e. union activity. In Luxemburg's opinion, the more closely Social Democracy engaged bourgeois society, the greater and more rapid the growth of class consciousness. Her solution was more friction rather than any specific injection of energy from some elite. Unlike Lenin, she was not a practitioner of power but of influence. In Luxemburg's view, the Lenin elite would serve, not as a dynamo, but as a magnet -- a magnet which would grow as the friction increased.

Luxemberg saw Lenin as the opposite extreme to Bernstein. Where Bernstein was for reformism, Lenin's elite ideal was sectarian. For Luxemburg, the disciplined elite lost sight of

the mass character of the movement while threatening to sink the leadership back into the condition of a cult which was as odious as becoming a party of bourgeois social reform.<sup>39</sup>

The period 1906-1912 was perhaps the happiest of Rosa Luxemburg's stormy life. Soon after her return to Germany in 1906 she was given the position of lecturer at the newly created Party School in Berlin where she remained for the next six years. With her status secure as a major ideologue within the SPD, her reputation was European-wide. The steady income afforded by her teaching position allowed her to lead her comfortable 'bourgeois' life style complete with annual vacations to Switzerland and Italy. With her activities pretty much restricted to pedagogic pursuits instead of 'doing,' Luxemburg was free from the nagging antagonisms which had plagued her early years in Berlin. Engaged in teaching political economy and economic history, her classes "sharpened the subject matter ...[enabling me] to develop my ideas."<sup>40</sup> Compiling evidence for her lectures, Luxemburg synthesized the basic ideas of Marxian economics which appeared after her death in a work entitled The Introduction to Political Economy.<sup>41</sup> A single facet of economics, the study of imperialism, was expanded into a book, The Accumulation of Capital (1913), in which she committed the twin sins of revising Marx and disagreeing with Lenin.<sup>42</sup> It is upon this work that the heresy of 'Luxemburgism' has been built.

The abstract question of imperialism, particularly Prussian militarism combined with German monopoly capitalism, provided the context for The Accumulation of Capital. By academic training an economist and by avocation a mathematician, Rosa Luxemburg was

admirably suited for the work of Marxian critic. As early as 1898 she had noted that there were serious weaknesses in Marx's economics. In classic Marxism the eventual collapse of capitalism was inevitable owing to the inherent contradictions manifest in the nature of capitalist economies. Recurrent and worsening crises would so strain the system that it would break down. In volumes II and III of Das Kapital, Marx provided empirical and mathematical proofs for his theoretical assertions. Marx assumed a theoretically closed economy with only two classes -- proletariat and their exploiters -- all other classes, deriving their income from the first two groups, could be excluded from consideration.

Luxemberg maintained that Marx's evidence did not merit his conclusions and that there must be other explanations for the continued growth of capitalism. In her evaluation of the validity of Marx's rigid construct, Luxemberg maintained that increased productive forces not envisioned by Marx had resulted in surplus production. In order to realize the maximization of their profits, the capitalists were forced by market pressures to look beyond the 'two class' system. With the accumulation of capital in the hands of a few entrepreneurs, the independent economic bodies within the system were absorbed into finance-capitalism. The maximization of profits undermined the 'iron law of wages' since the standard of living of the working classes of western Europe undeniable had risen. A 'third' market<sup>43</sup> was discovered once the level of saturation had been attained within the closed system thus explaining the boom of imperialism in the

last decades of the 19th century -- a boom ignited by the lack of demand and by the surplus value of commodities which compelled the capitalist states to seek new markets in order that the accumulation of capital not be arrested. The collapse of capitalism therefore would be postponed until imperialism had run its course and only then would the true internal contradictions of capitalism lead to its fall.

Subsequent generations of economists have criticized her theory yet, for the period, The Accumulation of Capital was brilliant. Most of the SPD leadership could not grasp the intricacies of her economics yet, out of instinct, they assailed her. What she attempted to do was to utilize Marx's own technique to update his arguments. In fact, what she succeeded in doing, without knowing or intending it, was to completely alter Marx's analysis of the capitalist economic system. By assigning such a vital role to the 'third' market, she changed the basis of capital accumulation from something predicated upon the exploitation of the masses to one which derived its main sustenance from outside the system. Therefore, the proletariat, in such an economic environment, would be co-opted into the capitalist structure. The wage laborers, having a share of the capitalist 'cake,' could hardly now be considered the vanguard of the revolution as she had postulated, most notably in her Mass Strike pamphlet. On the contrary, at best, the workers would be passive and, far more likely, would probably join their respective nationalist, imperialist, capitalist masters to defeat any alteration in the 'third' world. In bitter irony, if one accepts the validity of her arguments in The Accumulation of

Capital, then the exploited become the joint exploiters -- this paradox culminating in the collapse, not of capitalism in August 1914, but of international socialism.

#### CHAPTER FOUR THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND THE SPARTAKUSBUND

Just as in 1905, the outbreak of the First World War caught the various socialist parties of Europe completely unprepared. An emergency meeting of the International was held in Brussels in which Luxemburg and Jaures alone took on an uncompromising position against the war calling for the solidarity of the international working class. This attitude ran counter to the official positions taken by the respective constituent parties which viewed themselves to be nationalist first and socialist second. This resulted in the utter collapse of the Second International and the 'postponement' of the class struggle.

The crisis for the SPD was the August 4, 1914 vote in the Reichstag on the issue of war credits. To the great shock of European socialism the SPD unanimously voted in favor of the war budget.<sup>44</sup> While profoundly dismayed by the betrayal of the SPD of the class struggle, Luxemburg was not surprized. As early as the Stuttgart International of 1907 she had perceived that the SPD would increasingly shift toward the right. Led by Gustav Noske, her future executioner, the SPD argued against a Luxemburg-Lenin anti-war amendment<sup>45</sup> stating that the "defense of the Fatherland" must have priority over any international action which the united European socialist parties might undertake to prevent the outbreak of war. After 1910, recognizing the decided

opportunist shift in Kautsky's writings, Luxemburg broke with the chief SPD ideologue. In 1913, along with Marchlewski and Franz Mehring, Luxemburg began to publish the Sozialdemokratische Korrespondenz, a left wing paper designed to make public the views of the radicals within the SPD and to make an appeal to the workers.

By voting for war credits, the SPD, in the opinion of Luxemburg, was no longer a 'shadow' party waiting for the revolution to overthrow the capitalist regime. Equally antagonistic toward the anti war faction, the SPD, eager to demonstrate their loyalty as good Germans, branded the dissenters traitors, not only to the nation but also to socialism. The left, now free to discredit the party, coalesced around the leadership of Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht who capsulized the feelings of the anti war faction in his famous phrase: "The main enemy is at home."<sup>46</sup>

Rosa Luxemburg played a small role in the practical politics during the war. On February 1, 1915, she was arrested as a result of a pre-war conviction for publicly insulting Kaiser Wilhelm II, and placed in prison, but not before the first issue of Die Internationale had been released.<sup>47</sup> Determined not to be stifled, she immediately embarked upon a study of the war which she completed by April 1915 but did not appear until 1916, under the title The Crisis of Social Democracy. She was persuaded to use the pseudonym 'Janius' and the work is usually referred to as the Janiusbroschüre (Janius Pamphlet).<sup>48</sup>

The Janius Pamphlet is atypical of her writing style being neither theoretical nor journalistic. Not having to face a dead-

line, she could take time to polish her prose.<sup>49</sup> She also had to consider the censors who were obviously very active during the war, particularly on the watch for groups such as the Gruppe Internationale, Luxemburg's new affiliation. In the pamphlet, she assaulted the SPD war policy of collaboration and sought to destroy the SPD contention that Germany was fighting to preserve kulture from the barbarism of tsarist Russia. This was, in Luxemburg's opinion, a capitalist-imperialist war. "In the era of imperialism," she wrote, "there can be no more national wars."<sup>50</sup> She placed the blame of the collapse of European socialism and internationalism upon the actions of the SPD, as they failed to educate the masses into acceptance of their class consciousness, maintaining the proletariat in a subordinate position without any independent initiative. Without this initiative, according to the Luxemburg formula, there could be no revolution. In her view, the bourgeois hypocrites that composed the SPD leadership sought only to maintain their social positions while never really accepting nor comprehending the consciousness of the working class. It was this internal, institutionalized, contradiction which led to "the unprecedented, the incredible 4th of August, 1914."<sup>51</sup> Repudiating the SPD, Luxemburg maintained that their treachery provided the final break between the party and the proletariat.

During the war, Lenin clamored for a new International comprised only of those parties who accepted the new anti-imperialism, the necessity of tight organization, and a structured command hierarchy.<sup>52</sup> Lenin's view of a revolutionary



party started at the top with a cadre of hardened, professional revolutionists, backed by a rigid supporting structure, with a passive proletariat as the cannon fodder. In contrast, Luxemburg's started from the masses and worked up to an organization that would evolve during the early stages of revolution. In the appendix to the Janius Pamphlet Luxemburg outlined the guidelines for the creation of the Third International. These guidelines were accepted by the Gruppe Internationale and later by the Spartakusbund. The program was based upon the idea that the world war presented Europe with a choice:

Either the triumph of imperialism and the destruction of all culture and, as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration, a vast cemetery. Or, the victory of socialism, that is, the conscious struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism and its method: war. This is the dilemma of world history, an Either/Or whose scales are trembling in the balance, awaiting the decision of the class conscious proletariat .... If the proletariat learns from this war to assert itself, to cast off its serfdom to the ruling class, to become the lord of its own destiny, the shame and misery will not have been in vain.<sup>53</sup>

The choice presented no room for compromise, 'either' the victory of socialism 'or' the establishment of barbarism. There could be no end to warfare until the international working class came to recognize that the war represented "the suicide of the European working class."

The workers of England, of France, of Germany, of Italy, of Belgium are murdering each other at the bidding of capitalism ... dividends are rising -- proletarians are falling; and there sinks a fighter of the future, a soldier of the revolution, a saviour of humanity from the yoke of capitalism, into the grave. This madness will not stop ... until the workers of Germany, of France, of Russia and of England will wake up out of their drunken sleep; will clasp each



others' hands in brotherhood and will drown the bestial chorus of war agitators and the hoarse cry of capitalist hyenas with the mighty cry of labour, "Proletarians of all countries, unite!"<sup>54</sup>

As the war dragged on, the SPD leadership and rank and file began to experience divisions. By December of 1915, twenty SPD Reichstag delegates voted against the new war credits while another twenty-two abstained. The numbers of dissenters grew until March of 1916, when the right wing faction of the SPD expelled the anti war centralists from the party's Reichstag delegation. This action created a three way split inside German social democracy -- the pro war majority SPD, the anti war Independent Social Democrats (USPD), and the revolutionary Liebknecht-Luxemberg group.<sup>55</sup>

The emergence of the USPD made it all the more important that the left establish an effective organization. Jogiches appeared in Berlin and immediately utilized his conspiratorial talents to build a network of agents, despite the omnipotent police who decimated the faction through arrests. On January 1, 1916, in Liebknecht's law offices in Berlin, the survivors of the Gruppe Internationale formed what later would be called the Spartakusbund. Their program was founded upon a draft of Luxemburg's which had been smuggled out of prison -- essentially the program in the Janius Pamphlet.<sup>56</sup>

Two weeks later Luxemburg was released from prison and began revolutionary activities, primarily in periodically distributed, illegal tracts called the Spartakusbriefe (Spartakus Letters). The Spartakusbund's ability to mobilize support among the working class was seriously undercut by the evolution of the USPD as an

anti-war faction. In a desperate attempt to attract the working class, the Spartakus League decided to stage a May Day demonstration in Berlin. As soon as Liebknecht shouted "down with the Government; down with war!", he was arrested. Although the demonstration was peacefully put down, the effrontery of the Spartacus League was a slap in the face for both the regime and the SPD.<sup>57</sup>

The May Day demonstration provoked the regime into staging more widespread arrests. On July 10, Luxemburg was again arrested and although never legally charged, was detained in prison for the remainder of the war. She continued to write her Spartacus Letters and various other pamphlets calling for the leaderless party to be active. In Berlin, Jogiches' efforts kept activities and the party moving, but the Spartakusbund could claim scarcely more than a few hundred followers.

#### CHAPTER FIVE THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION AND CRITICISM OF THE BOLSHEVIKS

While in prison, Rosa Luxemburg was effectively isolated from the events during 1917 and 1918 which were to recast European and world history. She was quickly drawn out of a deep depression by the March 1917 revolution. Broadly speaking, Luxemburg was in agreement with Lenin that a Russian revolution could spearhead a general European proletarian upheaval. As early as the mid-1890's she had recognized the revolutionary potential of Russia. This view was reinforced by the events of the Revolution of 1905 in which she perceived that Russia's backward socio-economic development had not enabled the bourgeoisie, immature as it was, to undertake the leadership of

the revolution. She also began to see the revolutionary value of the mass strike and the 'soviet' which, in contrast to western parliamentary participation, did not push the revolutionary elements of the working class into existing organizations. In the political vacuum created by the initial stages of the mass strike-revolution, the socialist proletariat could govern itself within the soviet and the emerging leadership would represent a cross-section of able intellectuals and class-conscious workers.

Luxemberg saw the fall of the Romanovs as a rebellion against a government, as a prelude to a general revolution. She viewed the Bolshevik seizure of power and the successes of Lenin and Trotsky during the October Revolution as the logical consequences of the events of March, 1917. But she began to fear that a Bolshevik victory might result in a separate peace and a triumph for Prussian militarism which would have deleterious effects upon western socialism. In an essay on the Russian revolution, Luxemburg wrote of her dilemma: she had to support the Bolsheviks while at the same time she dreaded the effects of their successes. The Bolshevik's policy centered around three themes: 1) their [the Bolshevik's] belief in a nationality's right to self-determination and their repeated recognition of the right of all people to enjoy this right even if it meant the partitioning of the state, 2) the distribution of the land to the peasants, and 3) the problem of dictatorship and democracy.

The pamphlet begins with her approval of the Bolsheviks:

The party of Lenin was the only one which grasped the mandate and the duty of a truly revolutionary party. ...Whatever a party could offer of courage, revolutionary farsightedness, and consistency in a

historic hour, Lenin, Trotsky, and the other comrades have given in good measure. All the revolutionary honour and capacity which western Social Democracy lacked was represented by the Bolsheviks. Their October uprising was not only the actual salvation of the Russian Revolution, it also was the salvation of the honour of international socialism.<sup>58</sup>

A lengthy list of criticisms followed. First, she wrote of her longstanding opposition to the partitioning of greater Russia. Second, she claimed that the nationalization of the land would be preferable to its distribution to the peasants, since that could create new difficulties in implementing future socialist land reforms.<sup>59</sup>

Her next two chapters criticized the Bolsheviks for dissolving the Constituent Assembly and for restricting the suffrage. Luxemburg reiterated her faith in the creativity of the masses against Lenin's "sterile spirit of a night watchman" which "concentrates on the control of party activity and not on its fertilization: on narrowing and tying down and not on developing and unifying the movement."<sup>60</sup> She strongly reacted against Trotsky's assertion that the Constituent Assembly no longer served any purpose. "No," she wrote, "it is precisely the revolution which creates by its glowing heat that delicate, vibrant, sensitive political atmosphere in which the waves of popular feeling, the pulse of popular life, work for the moment on the representative bodies in the most wonderful fashion."<sup>61</sup> Later, writing of the limiting of the franchise: "... It is a well known fact that without a free and untrammelled press, without the unlimited right of association and assemblage, the rule of the broad mass of the people is entirely unthinkable."<sup>62</sup>

What she did not know was that 'the broad mass of people' played no role in either Lenin's nor Trotsky's revolutionary model.

Her sharpest criticisms were aimed at 'Dictatorship' and from this section, which later critics would term 'Luxemburgism', came the point at which the idea was born that Rosa Luxemburg was an anti-Lenin heretic. She questioned the very purpose of the Bolshevik Revolution:

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. Not because of any fanatical concept of 'justice' but 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.<sup>61</sup>

Luxemburg was motivated by the fear that the Lenin-Trotsky theory of temporary dictatorship would lead to a perverse and deformed revolution. She once again questioned Lenin's notion of a highly disciplined party organization.

With the repression of political life in the land as a whole . . . without general elections, without a free struggle of opinion, 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, a few dozen party leaders of inexhaustible energy and boundless experience direct and rule. Among them, in reality 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 the dictatorship of a handful of politicians, that is, a dictatorship in the bourgeois sense.<sup>64</sup>

This work, written only a few months after the seizure of power

by the Bolsheviks, is not only a great piece of political clairvoyance, but it also demonstrates her extraordinary powers of political analysis.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE GERMAN REVOLUTION AND THE CREATION OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

By September 1918 it was clear that Germany could not win a military victory in the West. Strikes broke out and mutinies threatened the military. On November 9, the chancellor, Prince Max of Baden, handed over the government to the Reichstag SPD leader, Friedrich Ebert. Philipp Schiedemann, one of the two SPD members in Prince Max's cabinet and future foreign minister in the Ebert regime, proclaimed the democratic republic on the steps of the Reichstag. Two hours later, from a balcony of the Imperial Palace, Liebknecht proclaimed a socialist republic. The socialists -- both Ebert and Liebknecht -- had no program formulated. After years of struggle, political power was thrown to them. In spite of the red flags and slogans, the first genuine impulse was to restore order. The SPD promised peace and their steady loyalty during the war assured the propertied classes that the SPD could be trusted with power whereas the Spartakusbund was already associated with Bolshevism and anarchy.<sup>65</sup>

Also on November 9, Rosa Luxemburg was released from jail. Her entire life's work had been in anticipation of a German revolution. Back in Berlin, she saw her task was to reconcile the unique conditions of Germany with her own ideals and also with the precedent set by Lenin in Russia. Her ideal was to refashion Germany into the image of her lifelong vision of Marxism.

Luxemberg saw the Majority SPD as being co-opted into bourgeois democracy. In her Russian Revolution pamphlet she had written:

Either it [the revolution] must advance rapidly and with determination, breaking down all resistance with an iron hand, and advancing its aims further and further as it proceeds, or it will soon be flung back beyond its own weaker beginnings and succumb to the counter-revolutionaries.<sup>66</sup>

Typical of her uncompromising mentality, she saw German social democracy as being faced by an 'either/or' dilemma: 'either' consolidate the gains made by the seizure of power through parliamentary reforms, 'or' immediate social revolution with the creation of a socialist state governed by the 'dictatorship of the proletariat,' with the latter the choice of the Spartakusbund.

In Rote Fahne (Red Banner), the party's newspaper, Rosa wrote a long editorial, What Does the Spartacus League Want?. The editorial listed their demands: disarmament of 'counterrevolutionary' groups; creation of a worker's militia; trial of war criminals; abolition of separate political states and establishment of a unified German republic; a complete revision of the laws regulating working hours and conditions; 'total' socialization of all business and industry; and immediate establishment of contact with proletarian organizations in other countries in the interest of lasting world peace. The editorial was really an appeal for humanitarian idealism:

The essence of socialist society consists in the fact that the great labouring mass ceases to be a dominated mass, but rather, makes the entire political and economic life its own life and gives that life a conscience, free and auton-



omously directed. ... They [the workers] have to acquire the feeling of responsibility proper to active members of the collectivity which alone possesses ownership of all social wealth. They have to develop industriousness without the capitalist whip; the highest productivity without authority. The highest idealism in the interest of the collectivity, the strictest self-discipline, the truest public spirit of the masses are the moral foundations of socialist society, just as stupidity, egotism, and corruption are the moral foundations of capitalist society.<sup>67</sup>

The Spartakusbund had deceived themselves into believing that the German workers and soldiers were willing to carry out the revolution. The war weary populace wanted the restoration of order. The Spartakusbund held out the image of the unfinished revolution and sought to imitate the successes of the Bolsheviks, but the people upon whom the movement depended were unwilling to act.

On the surface, it appeared that Germany might follow the path of Russia. All across Germany worker's and soldiers 'soviets' were formed and for a time these groups represented the only real power. The worker's and soldier's 'soviets' held a National Congress in Berlin from December 16 through the 20th to debate whether the future government of Germany should be entrusted to a National Assembly or a permanent council of worker organizations. The overwhelming majority moved toward the SPD position of the regularization of transport and food allocation and a maintenance of civil order. Of the 489 delegates at the Congress, only ten were affiliated with the Spartacus League -- neither Luxemburg or Liebknecht were given credentials since they were not soldiers or workers. The Congress decided that January 19 should be election day for the National Assembly, meanwhile it



should attempt to reconstitute stable government institutions through a demand for the preservation of order.

Luxemberg responded to the decisions made at the Congress with typical Spartacus optimism: "If the cardinal question of the revolution was clearly capitalism or socialism, the vast masses of people would not hesitate for a moment."<sup>68</sup> Again Luxemburg and her Spartacus cohorts misread the German people. The SPD and the rightist press had succeeded in convincing German society that the leftist movement was a threat to Germany. Rather than cease the revolutionary appeals that frightened people, the party was determined to carry out their program.

The Spartacus League illustrated great reluctance to establish a solid organization. One of the great evils was the bureaucracy which organizations necessarily must create. As the chief ideologue, Rosa saw herself as an apostle of Marx, and with self-assured patience she awaited the events of the dialectic. Because the Spartakusbund remained faithful to Luxemburg's idea of a decentralized organization, it failed to control the extremist fringe. These radical elements -- drifters, criminals, and anarchists -- resorted to acts of terrorism and looting under the name of the Spartakusbund, which did not sanction their activities. These highly publicized acts of urban violence further denegated the party's image, particularly when a power vacuum existed in the urban centers of Saxony, the Rhineland, the Baltic and North Sea ports, and especially Berlin.

Just as hooligans were attracted to the party, so were revolutionaries of note. Karl Radek appeared in Berlin claiming to have a mandate from Lenin to Bolshevize the Spartakusbund. In

the view of these developments, Liebknecht found it very difficult to maintain the thin relationship with the USPD, which increasingly moved toward the Ebert government. Luxemburg stood in opposition to any moves to make a total break from social democracy. Instead, she favored the education of the masses and participation in the electoral process. In a pamphlet written in 1903, In Memory of the Proletarian Party, she pointed out that the capitalist system would not fall in a single blow, but must be gradually overthrown through the use of the capitalist's own weapons -- parliamentary democracy and bourgeois political freedoms. By using the existing avenues to power, socialists could gain both legitimacy and mobilize support among the German working class. Rosa still did not believe that the working class had developed a sufficient class consciousness to advocate the revolutionary policies that the extremist factions demanded.<sup>69</sup>

Always the orthodox Marxist, Luxemburg believed that any simple faith in the collapse of the bourgeois SPD coalition, without a concurrent collapse of bourgeois society, was unhistorical. The capitalist state would fall only when it failed in the task of organizing capitalist production to the point where the misery of the proletariat increases and they become revolutionary. The role of the party, at that time, was to influence the masses intellectually, and to mold them into an agent of social transformation. In Rosa's view, any seizure of power simply because the SPD was weak would represent a merger without the support of the revolutionary proletariat.

The Spartacus League will never assume governmental power unless by means of the clear, un-

equivocal will of the large majority of the proletarian masses in Germany, never otherwise than by means of their conscious consent to the prospects, aims, and fighting methods of the Spartacus League.<sup>70</sup>

In contrast to Lenin's revolutionary model, power rested within the proletariat and was expressed only when the revolutionary stage was correct.

From December 30, 1918 to January 1, 1919, the Spartakusbund convened in Berlin. The delegates were not truly representative of the party: they were generally young and very impressed by the events in Russia. Two major decisions were made: 1) to leave the USPD and form an independent party, the Communist Party (KPD); and 2) not to take part in the National Assembly's election. Rosa Luxemburg attempted to convince the convention that the situation was not yet ready for revolutionary activity, but was unsuccessful. In Liebknecht's view, the USPD had joined the Ebert government, a victim of "Parliamentary cretinism".<sup>71</sup> The majority, to which Liebknecht gave support, favored an immediate rising to topple the Ebert government. The convention concluded and the radicals within the new KPD made contacts with the left-wing Independents and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards in Berlin, which resulted in an ambiguous program of action.

The KPD acted first when the government demanded the resignation of Emil Eichhorn as Berlin chief of police. Eichhorn, a member of the extreme left of the USPD, was sympathetic to the Spartakusbund and was suspected of supplying them with arms. On January 5, Eichhorn refused to accept his dismissal and refused to leave his office, and a large demonstration took place in Berlin. The Revolutionary Shop

Stewards formed soviet-like 'revolutionary committees' in the capital. The next morning, Liebknecht declared the fall of the Ebert-Schiedemann government by virtue of the sovereign power of the workers and soldiers.

The government was vulnerable to mob violence -- the soldiers could not be counted upon to fire at, in many cases, former comrades and the civil police, thanks to Eichhorn, was disorganized. Ebert's government responded by peaceful demonstrations to counter those of the 'violent' left. A large anti-Communist crowd ringed the government buildings, but the KPD refused to fire upon the unarmed workers.

Decisive action by the KPD could easily have resulted in the conquest of the chancellory, especially after two days and nights, the exhausted right-wing socialists withdrew. Instead of taking the initiative, the KPD vacillated, contenting themselves with debate rather than action. While they deliberated, the forces of the right regrouped and prepared to strike.

Although she was vehemently opposed to both the creation of the Communist Party and the resort to street violence, Luxemburg remained optimistic that the dialectic would prevail and provide for the victory of socialism and that "the general immaturity of the German revolution" could only be made mature by trial and error.<sup>72</sup> Her daily editorials in Rote Fahne were radical, yet calmed by humanistic idealism. The Germans were convinced by her repeated calls for action. The most threatening element in these editorials in Rote Fahne, for bourgeois Germany, was the realization that the Berlin rising was in fact the initiation of

class warfare.

The 'civil war' which some have anxiously tried to banish from the revolution cannot be dispelled. For civil war is only another name for class struggle, and the notion of implementing socialism without a class struggle, ... is a ridiculous petit-bourgeois illusion.<sup>73</sup>

The strikes which have just broken out ... are the beginning of a full-scale war between capitalism and labour in Germany; they herald the onset of which can be nothing less than the destruction of the capitalist [system].<sup>74</sup>

From the beginning of the Berlin Rebellion, Luxemburg considered the resort to violence senseless. Nevertheless, her writings and editorials had made her infamous -- Rosa Luxemburg was synonymous with violent revolution. Since the two leading members of the KPD were of the opposite sex, stories of wild, 'red orgies' circulated. Blame for the bloodshed in Berlin was laid at Rosa Luxemburg's feet while in fact, she was entirely opposed to the Berlin uprising.

Under the direction of Noske (SPD Minister of Defense and long-time adversary of Luxemburg), military units were organized and readied by January 8th. During the night of January 10 these troops advanced into the center of the city. Three days later, the Freikorp, aided by bourgeois 'citizen's corps', had restored order to the capital. Noske ordered the arrest of the KPD leaders and the military ransacked the KPD headquarters. Liebknecht and Luxemburg refused to leave the city and were finally arrested. They were taken to the Eden Hotel, then serving as headquarters for one of the many Freikorp units, to be questioned. After the interrogations were completed, first Liebknecht, then Luxemburg, were hustled through the crowded

lobby. In each case, after exiting from a side door, they were struck in the head with a rifle butt. Several minutes divided the crimes, then each was driven away in waiting automobiles.

Liebknecht was taken to the Tiergarten and shot; his body later delivered to a mortuary marked 'unknown'. Luxemburg, already half-dead from the blow she recieved from the rifle-butt, was shot while in the back seat of the car; her body thrown off the Liechtenstein Bridge into the Landwehr Canal. Leo Jorgiches, loyal to Rosa and the party to the end, dutifully sent off a telegram to Lenin: "Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht have carried out their ultimate revolutionary mission."<sup>75</sup>

#### CHAPTER SEVEN LUXEMBERGISM

Nothing legitimatizes theory better than success. The Bolsheviks succeeded whereas the Spartacus Rising did not. Leninism has been reified into dogma; Luxemburgism denigrated into heresy. This leads to the inevitable question: What is Luxemburgism?

Luxemburgism is pure inductive theory posthumously constructed from the mass of her writings. Above all, Rosa Luxemburg was primarily an agitator, journalist, and pamphleteer. Never fettered to any single theoretical formula, her political writings were loosely structured which, although addressed to a certain audience with a clear motive in mind, almost always overshot her limited political objectives. Her arguments seem to burst with assumptions and ideas more often than not unconnected to her original thesis. Luxemburg's ideas found

expression in the form of polemics aimed against what she considered faulty Marxism and she was killed before she could produce a comprehensive, cohesive system. Shortly after her death protagonists and antagonists alike attempted to formulate an ideology from Luxemburgism where one did not exist previously.<sup>76</sup>

The first Marxist of note to critique the problem of Luxemburgism was Georg Lukacs. Lukacs was, at least initially, an enthusiastic Luxemburgite. In 1922, along with a collection of essays published together under the title History and Class Consciousness, Lukacs set out to identify Rosa Luxemburg's 'democratic socialism' which so conflicted with Bolshevik theory and practice. Lukacs pointed out that Luxemburg's Russian Revolution pamphlet illustrated a tendency to "oppose the exigencies of the moment [in favor of] the principles of future stages of the revolution"<sup>77</sup> citing further her "overestimation of the organic character of the course of history."<sup>78</sup> Lukacs agreed that class consciousness was the motive force behind revolutions yet he differed with her conception of organization as process. Fundamental to all of Luxemburg's writing was her belief that revolution rested in the hands of the proletariat, not with the party. In the course of the historical process, organizational structures modified themselves to adapt to a dynamic revolutionary situation. While Lukacs was willing to concede that Luxemburg was the first Marxist to understand the importance of the unorganized masses in the revolutionary process and to see the need for new forms of organization he reproached her for overestimating the external power and maturity of the proletariat while at the same time underestimating the non-proletariat



elements outside the working class as well as the strength of ideology within the proletariat itself. What he was really addressing was her 'theory of spontaneity.'<sup>79</sup> He wrote that Luxemburg had shown great insight in perceiving the limitations of traditional organization but by removing her idea from the purely abstract and inserting it into the historical process she made the mistake of theorizing the class struggle as being inevitably successful without the intermediary of the party or its organizational functions.

Lukacs was certainly correct when he pointed out that Luxemburg demonstrated an excessive optimistic belief in the spontaneous initiative of the masses as a revolutionary force. Of course, he had the benefit of 20-20 hindsight reading the failures of the Spartacus Rising into her polemical works. Yet Luxemburg clearly did see revolution as 'process' and not as an explosion. In essence, had he not been a Luxemburg partisan, Lukacs might well have called her theory of revolution Lemarckian, tantamount to being termed a radical petit-bourgeois democrat, or worse, Bernsteinian.

What Lukacs failed to read into Luxemburg's writing is the time frame and circumstances in which she was working. First, her style lent itself to inflammatory calls for action which were always focused upon a specific political situation. Contradictions are inevitable, and unquestionably her theory of revolution is rife with them. Unlike Kautsky, she was no mere popularizer of Marx. She recognized that, like herself, Marx had primarily been a superb publicist. Luxemburg viewed Marxism as a



view of life and as an analytical technique. Her writing is full of quotations from Marx but they merely substantiate the validity of her own contentions. She saw Marxism as a necessary and compelling analysis of reality, but dated, and her efforts were directed towards bringing Marxism up to date but only through the utilization of Marx's own techniques.<sup>80</sup> Secondly, Rosa Luxemburg toiled in Wilhelmine Germany where the labor movement was bureaucratic and narrow-minded; where 'the passive virtue of discipline' was the duty of the working class in which "professionally entitled [leaders] ... control the initiative and leadership of the local life of the party and treated the members as rubber-stamps;" where the conservative SPD maintained a policy of slow evolution in which crises were avoided for fear of eroding the party calm. It was these elements which ended in the outright surrender of the SPD in August 1914. It was in this environment that Luxemburg advocated 'spontaneous revolution,' not necessarily because she believed in its efficacy but due to her perceived need to break up the ossified bureaucracy and conservatism of the party apparatus by creating both a new methodology for mobilizing support among the proletariat and a more progressive program based upon action. As an intellectual, Rosa Luxemburg endeavored to analyze and amend the dialectic in its relation to current trends yet, unlike the other intellectuals of German social democracy, she was actively engaged in practical actions and in her writings she always aligned herself with the political immediacies, even to the point of participating in revolutions. As a result, and something her critics fail to recognize, her pragmatic tailoring of her

polemics to political contingencies led to seeming inconsistencies in her theory. Luxemburg's writings preached action; she never intended that her amorphous body of articles and pamphlets would serve as an ideology.<sup>80</sup>

Rosa Luxemburg, first and last, was a dedicated, professional revolutionist. Her allegiance was not to Germany nor the SPD but rather to international socialism. Like many Jews in the socialist movement, Luxemburg rejected any notion of a particular nationalism. She rejected even the limited 'nationalism' articulated by the Bund. She viewed nationalism, religion, and sex roles in pretty much the same light -- all were the manifestations of capitalist society and with the coming of socialism, they would cease to be. Her own unique sense of commitment to the revolution and international socialism insulated her against the strongly anti-Polish, anti-Semitic, and anti-female criticisms levelled at her from within and without the SPD. Therefore, despite the vehemence of the attacks directed upon her and her mounting feeling of alienation and isolation in Berlin, Luxemburg resolved to stay in Germany and influence events.<sup>82</sup>

Luxemburg was fortified by her faith in the inevitable collapse of capitalism. She also had a sense of the missionary about her. She perceived herself as representing the 'Russian method' of revolution in Germany -- the idea that action was of a superior order than polemics. This messianism is best illustrated in her literary criticism of History of My Contemporary, printed after her death. In the introduction she

outlined the German-Russian dichotomy which, for her, was the central axis of European civilization -- the achievements of Western bourgeois culture tempered by the emerging socialism of the East. Dostoievsky and Tolstoy represented the literary voices from Russia which seemed to inaugurate an Eastern cultural renaissance in contrast to declining German kultur. However, in the political realm, German socialists were necessary to bring order and unity to disorganized and inchoate Russian doctrine.

Rosa Luxemburg's most important contribution to practical Marxist doctrine was the progressive moralist impulse she provided. An autonomous political thinker in her own right, although outwardly a doctrinaire and a 'scientific' revolutionary, hers was an essentially moral doctrine which saw in social revolution and socialist movements in general, not merely the fulfilment of the laws of dialectic materialism but the liberation of the human spirit. Take for example her attitude toward war: while war was necessary and logically inevitable in an imperialist-capitalist world, she viewed it as abhorrent and insupportable and made every effort to first prevent it, then later to end it. This is reflective of her willingness to fly from Marxian doctrine despite her full commitment to Marxism. She was an independent intellect whose works transcended the rigorous Marxian framework in many instances. A case in point is The Accumulation of Capital where, although using Marx's technique gleaned from Kapital, Luxemburg arrived at a fundamentally different conclusion. Moreover, by illustrating that the glut of capital would have suffocated

capitalism had finance-capitalism not penetrated the markets of first, the peasants and craftsmen, neither of whom are in the dual-class rubric; then, ultimately, colonial economies, she was the first Marxist to point out that capitalism led to imperialism. These arguments, further refined by Lenin, became part of the Marxian theoretical fabric and emerged as a tenet of socialism in general.<sup>83</sup>

Her controversy with Lenin over the question of organization is central to any discussion of Luxemburg's post-1905 writing. Luxemburg's doctrine was not democratic as Lukacs and others charged, but rather based on the difference between theoretical and real revolution. Luxemburg's revolution model was predicated upon the need to participate; that is, to educate the masses into their class consciousness through revolutionary activities; to build frictions which would expose the internal contradictions of capitalist society; and, once the preconditions were established, finally to resort to violent revolution.<sup>84</sup> Her criticisms were directed against the rigid and static organization -- organization for organization's sake as in the case of the SPD -- not against organization in general. Further, she rejected the role of violence with which the Bolsheviks propped up their 'dictatorship of the proletariat,' yet she fully recognized the role of violence in the initial stages of the revolution. On the topic of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' Luxemburg's view is quite clear: it represented a more direct and intensive form of democracy than anything that had preceded it complete with elections, freedom of the press, freedom of expression, etc.

In the Bolshevik Revolution, she saw nothing other than the cult of "dialectic terror" dominating this, the vital first stage of socialism. To Luxemburg, only when the conditions were 'ripe' for revolution could she sanction the resort to violence but systematic terror played no role in her vision of the revolution.<sup>85</sup>

As a theoretician of revolution, Luxemburg was the most original of her contemporaries; as the practitioner of revolution, Lenin had no equal. What then was Rosa Luxemburg's culpability in the disaster of January 1919?

Luxemburg's pre-war theoretical writing demonstrated, as Lukacs points out, an intuitive appreciation of the complexities of classic Marxism.<sup>86</sup> Her political pamphlets illustrate brilliance and a marked ability to create basic theoretical propositions but, they had invariably been developed as critical reactions to errors which Luxemburg perceived her contemporaries making. Furthermore, her faith in the revolutionary potential of the masses precluded her deriving a positive program of action or a blue-print for the post-revolutionary society. Added to this is her rejection of rigid party organization and her active agitation against the practical policies of the Bolsheviks in Russia. Then finally add the psychological disillusionment which evolved after the betrayal of the SPD in 1914, heightened by her imprisonment for the bulk of the war period and one can then come to appreciate that, upon her release from jail, her mental and physical constitution had been seriously eroded. Although still young in age, the war years had taken a severe toll upon her.

In the meantime, the Spartacus League had seized upon her

negative criticism and institutionalized her theory into an ideology and finally into a political party whose avowed goals were antipathetical to her basic philosophy. Instead of 'moral socialism' the KPD dedicated itself to tearing down the socio-economic institutions of capitalism and imperialism but without any concrete alternatives to put in their place. As Liebknecht wrote: "The achievement of socialism is only possible if everything is pulled down completely; only after the destruction of the entire capitalist system can reconstruction begin."<sup>87</sup> This clearly has no genesis in Luxemburg's writings.

What role did she select to play in the unfolding Spartacus Rising? Just as in 1905-06, she opted to participate but in the capacity of ideologue. She saw her primary function as an interpreter of the Bolshevik Revolution whose duty it was to distill from the Russian experience those aspects which were applicable to a Germany whose historical station was fundamentally different than Russia's. However, her isolation in jail in Posen and Breslau reinforced her desire to clarify the class struggle yet in doing so, illustrated an excessive oversimplification of the complex events inside Russia to the point where gross distortions appear. As Lukacs quite correctly points out, Rosa's Russian Revolution pamphlet overestimated the purely proletarian aspects of the Bolshevik Revolution ascribing to the working class a strength and maturity it clearly did not possess.<sup>88</sup>

During those fateful days in which the KPD was formed and a program of militancy formulated, Luxemburg, although a dissenter,

drifted along with the tide of opinion. Again buoyed by faith and the idea that this revolutionary stage was nothing more than a preliminary, educative juncture in what was a lengthy process, Luxemburg's dogmatic overestimates of the power of the proletariat as a revolutionary locomotive contrasts sharply with Lenin's practical concrete leadership. Even after the failure of the Second International, Luxemburg clung to her belief that political influence played the vital role, failing to appreciate that power and power alone is the controlling element of all political activity. While Luxemburg was unable to divorce theory from practice; while she continued to point out how social revolution was not imminent in Germany because the preconditions for revolution were not compatible with her theoretical paradigms; while the KPD debated, Lenin was fusing ideology with power and making a revolution in Russia. Where Lenin used theory as the disciplined application of the correct ideal, he was able to reduce it down to a simple political equation whereas Luxemburg became constrained by her own theoretical straight-jacket.

The supreme irony was that the primacy of theory had been so ingrained into her mentality that she failed to grasp that the decisive moment to translate theory into action had indeed finally arrived. Rosa Luxemburg, the high priestess of the 'Russian method', the advocate of participation, now acted like the typical bourgeois German social democrat she had heaped abuse upon. In a brusque yet insightful allegorical statement, Stalin remarked that social revolution in Germany was clearly impossible because the German KPD refused to walk on the grass. While the



situation in Germany in January 1919 did not present the optimal conditions for revolutionary success, in the demonstrations and preparatory strikes taken in Berlin, Saxony, Bremen and Hamburg there was proffered the best and last possible moment in which a revolution had any chance of success.

The severest criticism of the failure of the Spartacus Rising appeared in the Rote Fahne in which a worker wrote that the only indication of the lack of 'ripeness' of the proletariat was their failure to put their own leaders in charge of the movement and "as the first revolutionary act [do away] with their deliberating leaders."<sup>89</sup> The pathetic irony is that Rosa Luxemburg, who afixed all her hopes to the revolutionary potential of the class-conscious German proletariat, was roundly hated by a large majority of German working men. Furthermore, hamstrung by the German tradition to theorize and by a hierarchical organization that demanded an ascriptive working class, the workers were totally incapable of developing their own leadership and direction. Nothing illustrates Luxemburg's detachment from reality and her optimistic idealism better than her final Rote Fahne editorial, printed the day before her death:

The leadership failed. But the leadership can and must be created anew by the masses and out of the masses. The masses are the crucial factor; they are the rock on which the ultimate victory of the revolution will be built. The masses were up to the task. They fashioned this 'defeat' into a part of those historical defeats which constitute the pride and power of the international socialism. And that is why this 'defeat' is the seed of future triumph. "Order reigns in Berlin!" You stupid lackeys! Your 'order' is built on sand. The revolution will 'raise itself up again clashing,'



and to your horror it will proclaim itself  
to the sound of trumpets.<sup>90</sup>

She was quite correct that the resounding sound of trumpets would again ring out in Berlin but she did not even approach to envision what horror the 'new order' would bring.

Luxemberg's polemics just prior to and during the Spartacus rising strongly hinted that a class war was indeed initiated in Germany but what her blind optimism did not allow her to see was that in creating the revolution the radical socialists were planting the dragons' teeth of an antithesis far too loathsome for her 19th century mind to fathom. Just as in 1848 in France, Luxemburg recognized that the Spartacus Rising in Berlin would stir up a bourgeois back-lash all across Germany and, given the immaturity of the proletariat and the manifest willingness of the petit-bourgeois to be co-opted into the counter-revolutionary tide, the German revolution was doomed. Similarly, she failed to recognize that Germany had reached a climax of sorts. The Kaiser's abdication invalidated the German constitution and the most disciplined state in Europe suddenly found itself in defeat and disorder. Two non-German winds blew upon Germany; the seemingly gentle breeze of liberalism from the Western democracies and the storm of Russian Bolshevism from the East. The almost hypnotic somnolence of Wilsonianism worked its charms during these crucial months of November and December 1918 and January 1919. In this atmosphere, the center, the Majority SPD, came to power and they attempted immediately to restore order. In contrast stood the KPD which represented Bolshevism, revolution, and continued turmoil. More importantly, out of the

abortive Spartacus Rising arose the 'stab in the back myth'. In Berlin, Germany was presented with the spectacle of a Jewish, foreign-led (Luxemberg, Radek, Jogiches), foreign-based (Moscow) revolution predicated upon the destruction of existing society and German kultur in the horror of class warfare. To this challenge all Germans -- reactionary aristocrats, the military, bourgeoisified workers, the petit-bourgeois, finance capitalists -- responded. The history of Weimar Germany was the vain attempt of the political center to preserve their coalition against both the extreme right and left which were united only in their hatred of and determination to destroy the bourgeois SPD centrists. In the end, it was the Nazis who managed, through the combination of decisive and calculatingly bold political actions, to integrate their values of nation, race, blood, and soil upon an all too receptive Germany.<sup>91</sup> It is unlikely that had the German Communists acted as ruthlessly in Berlin as the Bolsheviks in Moscow and Petrograd, the German Revolution would have succeeded. It is certain that Luxemberg's efforts to deal with the problems of the new world by using the best precepts of the old failed completely. Had Luxemberg died 'harder'; had she come down from the ivory tower into the streets, she most certainly would have strengthened the KPD. As it turned out, her death was merely a pathetic footnote to an ill-starred revolution. Had the revolution gone forward and if Luxemberg would have survived, Luxembergism would have continued to serve as the ideology of the KPD. That is, the KPD would not have become so rapidly Bolshevikized, nor would have the other western European communist parties, since Luxembergian 'moral socialism' would have held

great attraction. In addition, given the survival of Luxemburgism it is not inconceivable that there might have been a reconciliation with the social democrats which would have strengthened the center against the emergent right. In the end, the Spartacus Rising only lent credence to the 'stab in the back theory' which, in a Germany increasingly polarized between the extreme right and left, culminated in the horrors of National Socialism.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>L. W. Beck, A Commentary on Kant's 'Critique of Practical Reason,' (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961), pp. 34-44, 113-115. See also, Werner Busch, "The Development of Kant's Critical Philosophy, 1762-1780;" Klaus Hammacher and Albert Mues, "Renewal of Transcendental Philosophy of Kant and Fichte;" Helmut Konig, "Spirit and Revolution: Studies in Kant, Hegel, and Marx;" and Gerhard Lehmann, "The Virtues of Kant: New Studies in the History and Interpretation of Kant's Philosophy," Philosophy and History, Vol. XVI, #1 (1983): 9-14, 20-28.

<sup>2</sup>Marx's teleological viewpoint and his faith in "active will" were derived from Kant. Similarly, Marx was indebted to Kant's critical methodology, the notion of the transcendental quality of knowledge. Like Kant, Marx believed that "man was born free but everywhere [was] in chains," slave to the material conditions arising out of the capitalist mode of production. For Marx, the "active will" had to be educated through defeat and failure before the irresistible process of a revolutionary class struggle could fulfill Kant's 'moral imperative' and create a moral social order. See Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," and "The German Ideology: Part One - Feuerbach: Opposition of the Materialistic and Idealistic Outlook," in Marx-Engels Reader, Robert Tucker, ed. (New York: Dial, 1978), pp. 146-200.

<sup>3</sup>Ruth Fischer, a leader of the KPD (German Communist Party) between the wars, called Luxemburg and her influence the "syphilis bacillus" of the party.

<sup>4</sup>Peter Nettl, Rosa Luxemburg, 2 vols. (London: Oxford Press, 1966), 2:827.

<sup>5</sup>This thesis was integrated into her anti-nationalist polemics illustrating that Poland's destiny, either in the economic or the revolutionary sense, is tied up with that of greater Russia's.

<sup>6</sup>Nettl, Luxemburg, 1:87.

<sup>7</sup>M.K. Dziewanowski, The Communist Party of Poland (Cambridge: Harvard, 1959), p. 23.

<sup>8</sup>In Warsaw, the SDKP boasted a single party member and it was extremely difficult to communicate with him since he was always on the run from police.

<sup>9</sup>Bebel to Adler, 29 September 1898, in Adler, Briefwechsel, as cited by Nettl, 1:102-103.

<sup>10</sup>The Lithuanian social democrats joined the SDKP accepting the party program of the Luxemburg-Jogiches faction i.e. the rejection of national self-determination.

<sup>11</sup>Gunther Roth, The Social Democrats in Imperial Germany (New York: Bedminster, 1963), pp.71-83.

<sup>12</sup>Their fears were not unfounded. Wilhelm I called the SPD "the worst enemy" while his grandson, Wilhelm II, believed that he could master the social democrats through a policy of alternating the application of the big stick and the carrot-and-stick. See The Holstein Papers, Norman Rich and M.H. Fisher, eds. (London: Cambridge Press, 1955), pp.146-149.

<sup>13</sup>Rosa Luxemburg, Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg, Dick Howard ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 33.

<sup>14</sup>Nettl, 1:220-222.

<sup>15</sup>David McLellan, Marxism After Marx (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 28-38.

<sup>16</sup>Lelio Basso, Rosa Luxemburg - A Reappraisal (New York: Praeger, 1975), p. 23.

<sup>17</sup>The articles first appeared in the Leipziger Volkszeitung, 21 to 28 September 1898.

<sup>18</sup>Luxemburg, Social Reform or Revolution, Howard, Political Writings, pp.56-57.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>20</sup>Basso, Reappraisal, p. 68.

<sup>21</sup>Luxemburg, Social Reform or Revolution, Howard, p. 125.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>28</sup>The SDKP was composed of a uniformly young and overwhelmingly Jewish group of people.

<sup>28</sup>Ronald Florence, Marx's Daughters (New York: Dial, 1975),

pp. 92-93.

<sup>30</sup>Lukacs, for example, read Social Reform or Revolution soon after becoming familiar with Marx and acknowledged its significance in forming his thought. See Georg Lukacs, "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg" (1921), History and Class Consciousness, Rodney Livingston ed. (Cambridge: MIT, 1971), pp. 27-44.

<sup>31</sup>Luxemburg, The Mass Strike, The Political Party, and The Trade Unions, Robert Bland, ed. (New York: Harper, 1971), p. 71.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., pp. 55-56.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>38</sup>McLellan, Marxism After Marx, pp. 86-87.

<sup>39</sup>Nettl, 1:292.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 1:391.

<sup>41</sup>Published through the efforts of Paul Levi who would emerge as KPD leader after the deaths of Luxemburg and Liebknecht.

<sup>42</sup>Her previous work, Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy, had already established Luxemburg as an antagonist of Lenin.

<sup>43</sup>The 'third' market included not only colonial economies but also peasants and aristocrats within capitalist economies.

<sup>44</sup>Liebknecht voted in favor but only because he became the object of much pressure exerted upon him by the SPD leadership.

<sup>45</sup>Noske would emerge as the most vocal pro-war member of the SPD and a leader of the right-wing faction of the Majority SPD, he later became Minister of Defense in Ebert's government.

<sup>46</sup>Nettl, 2:618.

<sup>47</sup>The Gruppe Internationale emerged from a meeting held at Luxemburg's Berlin flat the day of the first war credit vote. While the group survived to become the Spartakusbund, it published only one edition of Die Internationale.

<sup>48</sup>The pseudonym 'Janius' was borrowed from the anonymous Letters of Janius that from 1769 to 1772 had attacked George III and his ministers in the Public Advertiser. Luxemburg used the pseudonym in order not to incur the further wrath of the Kaiser's government.

<sup>49</sup>She also had to consider the censors who were obviously very active during the war, particularly on the watch for anti-war groups such as the Gruppe Internationale.

<sup>50</sup>Luxemburg, The Mass Strike, The Political Party and the Trade Unions, p. 168.

<sup>51</sup>Luxemburg, Janius Pamphlet, as cited in David McClellan, Marxism After Marx, (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 53.

<sup>52</sup>Helmut Gruber, ed. International Communism in the Era of Lenin, (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 44.

<sup>53</sup>Luxemburg, Janius, as cited in Dick Howard, ed. Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg, p. 312.

<sup>54</sup>Luxemburg, Either/Or, cited in Ibid., p. 337.

<sup>55</sup>Lelio Basso, Rosa Luxemburg, A Reappraisal, pp. 125-130.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., pp. 138-141.

<sup>57</sup>Ronald Florence, Marx's Daughters, p. 135.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., citing Luxemburg, The Russian Revolution, p. 140.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>60</sup>Luxemburg, Organizational Questions, original English publication appeared as Marxism or Leninism?, (Glasgow: Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation, 1935), p. 15.

<sup>61</sup>Luxemburg, The Russian Revolution, as cited in B.D. Wolfe ed. The Russian Revolution and Leninism or Marxism?, (Ann Arbor: Michigan Press, 1961), p. 141.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>65</sup>Florence, pp. 144-145.

<sup>66</sup>Luxemburg, Russian Revolution, as cited by Carl Landauer, European Socialism, 2 vols. (Westport: Greenwood, 1959), 1:56.

<sup>67</sup>Luxemburg, What Does the Spartacus League Want?, as cited by Gruber, p. 106.

<sup>68</sup>Luxemberg, Our Problem and the Political Situation, as cited by Howard, p. 383.

<sup>69</sup>Luxemberg, What Does the Spartacus League Want?, Howard, p. 376.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>Nettl, 2:72.

<sup>72</sup>Contrast these calls to action to:

Socialism alone is able to complete the great work of lasting peace, to heal the thousand bleeding wounds of humanity, to transform the plains of Europe, trampled down by the apocalyptic horsemen of war, into blossoming gardens, to conjure up new forces of production ten times as great as the old destructive ones, to arouse all man's physical and moral energies, to replace hatred and dissension with fraternal solidarity, harmony and respect for everything that bears a human countenance.

-Rote Fahne, 25 November, 1918.

<sup>73</sup>Luxemberg, Rote Fahne, 20 November, as cited by Florence, p. 151.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., pp. 151-152.

<sup>75</sup>Nettl, 2:77.

<sup>76</sup>Georg Lukacs, Political Writings, Rodney Livingston, ed. (London: NLB, 1972), p. ix.

<sup>77</sup>Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness, as cited by Norman Geras, The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg (London: NLB, 1976), p. 174.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Nettl, 2:506-509.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 1:37.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 1:9.

<sup>82</sup>Raya Dunayevskaya, Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1981), pp. 2-3.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>84</sup>Nettl, p. 1:335.



<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 2:702-703.

<sup>86</sup>Georg Lukacs, 'The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg,' History and Class Consciousness, Rodney Livingston, ed. (Cambridge: M.I.T., 1971), pp. 32-33.

<sup>87</sup>Florence, Marx's Daughters, p. 151.

<sup>88</sup>As electoral results clearly indicated, the SPD and the other socialist and trade unionist parties never succeeded in attracting even 50% of the working class vote in the period after the withdrawal of the Anti-Socialist Laws and the start of the First World War. As a parliamentarian force, the SPD was hardly successful in mobilizing supports to say nothing of forging a revolutionary class-consciousness among the proletariat.

<sup>89</sup>Rote Fahne, 12 January 1919, as cited by Carl Landauer, European Socialism, 1:1, 150.

<sup>90</sup>Rote Fahne, 14 January 1919, as cited by Florence, pp. 155-156.

<sup>91</sup>Nettl, 1:342.

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THE SISYPHIAN LABOR:  
THE SOCIALIST 'MORAL IMPERATIVE' IN THE  
LIFE AND WRITINGS OF ROSA LUXEMBERG

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Political Science

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1985

Rosa Luxemburg is best known for her role in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and as founder of the Polish (and later Lithuanian) Social Democratic Party (SDKPiL), the Gruppe International, the Spartacusbund, and the German Communist Party. Her career provides an ideal vehicle for the study of German, Polish, and Russian socialism in the epoch-changing first two decades of the twentieth century. As foremost contemporary critic of Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky, of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, Luxemburg's writing serves as a mirror into the ideological soul of Marxism in the period both preceeding and following the First World War and the Russian and German revolutions. An orthodox dialectician, Rosa Luxemburg stood for a purified strain of Marxism: doctrinaire without dogma; romantic yet attentive to material conditions. Above all, Luxemburg defended the 'moral imperative' -- the notion that Marxism provided the path toward a more just and humane social structure based upon the spirit of community and shared values. Unwilling to compromise with those who would accept the expedient, be it Bernsteinian Revisionism or Lenin's authoritarianism, Luxemburg sought to update Marx's critique of capitalism in the light of radically altered economic and political conditions.