



Rosa Luxemburg, “The Russian Revolution”

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Abstract

The essay concerns the highly controversial pamphlet of Rosa Luxemburg *The Russian Revolution* (1918/1922), in which Luxemburg criticizes Lenin’s post-revolutionary policies, in particular his dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, an elected body. The essay reviews the history of the text’s publication and the intense debate, which continues to this day, over whether or not Luxemburg changed her mind on its central critique. At stake in the argument is not only Luxemburg’s evaluation of Lenin’s actions but also the correct weighting to be given to the two components in the central Marxist–Leninist dialectic of revolution: spontaneity and consciousness. In elaborating this point the essay brings in examples from the writings of Lukács and Stalin, and also discusses the dialectic’s centrality in socialist realism.

Keywords Marxism–Leninism · Centralism · German Marxism · Revolution · Dialectics · Socialist realism

When we think of Rosa Luxemburg today the first thing that comes to mind is the brutal murder of her and her fellow Communist leader Karl Liebknecht on 15 January 1919, which gave them both martyr status in the international communist movement. In *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) Georg Lukács declares that, “Her death at the hands of her bitterest enemies, Noske and Scheidemann, is, logically, the crowning pinnacle of her thought and life” (Lukács 1999, 44). Most historians see their murders as decisive in the defeat of the German revolution. But tragic and dramatic though their deaths were, and consequential though they were for the German left, the manner of her death should not define Rosa Luxemburg. From the 1900s through the 1920s she was a major player in the international revolutionary movement and her writings were at the center of some critical controversies among European Marxists. Luxemburg’s contradictory statements capture some of the critical dilemmas of Marxism and the Marxist theory of revolution. It is in that context that I come to look at her here.

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As a sign of the importance of Luxemburg's ideas, it is telling that Lukács devoted two chapters to her in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). But it is also symptomatic of the controversial status of her writings and their contradictory nature that the first of these gives a positive evaluation of her ideas and the second a largely negative one. The first chapter dates from January 1921 when her death was fairly recent, but Lukács opens the second, dated a year later (January 1922), with Paul Levi's publication that year of Luxemburg's last major work, *The Russian Revolution* (1918), and the attempted rebuttal by Clara Zetkin and Adolf Warski of Levi's assessment of Luxemburg's position on the Revolution, joining the bitter controversy among German Marxists as to whether Luxemburg had meant her criticisms of the Bolshevik Revolution and the way Lenin had handled the aftermath, or changed her mind on them, and whether these criticisms were justified. Here I will argue, in reviewing some of the major contributions to the controversy, that the furor (which continues to this day) was because *The Russian Revolution*, like many earlier texts by Luxemburg, not only critiques Lenin's revolutionary practice but does so in terms of the central dilemma of the Marxist–Leninist theory of revolution: the role of “spontaneity” in a revolution as compared with the role of “consciousness” i.e. politically informed and disciplined action that is guided by a revolutionary “vanguard”. Roughly speaking, while Lenin privileged “consciousness”, Luxemburg had a predilection for “spontaneity”.

But first some background on the publication history of *The Russian Revolution* and the responses to this text. Luxemburg began writing it while in Breslau prison in September–October, 1918, and though it was never finished it was published posthumously in 1922 by one of her friends and fellow Spartacist, Paul Levi. Even before the pamphlet appeared it was controversial, because it was taken by many to be an attack on Lenin's post-revolutionary policies. Luxemburg had in fact been initially ecstatic about the revolutionary events in Russia, which she variously called “an elixir of life” and the “potential ‘salvation’ of Europe that would “open a new epoch in world history”, but she became more and more disillusioned with the Bolshevik post-revolutionary administration. She announced her intention of publishing her criticisms of the Russian Revolution in the form of a pamphlet and could not be dissuaded (Nettl 1969, 430; Levi 1922, 1; Zetkin 1922, 7–8).

In the summer of 1918 Luxemburg smuggled out of the prison the first of a projected series of articles, “The Russian Tragedy”, which was largely a vent against the treaty of Brest-Litovsk and which she submitted to the illegal paper *Spartakus Briefe* where Levi was one of the three editors. They published it reluctantly in the September issue, adding a cautionary note of their own. She then wrote a further article containing a still sharper attack directed in particular at the supplementary protocols of the treaty; this time the editors decided not to print it. Levi thought her critique of the Bolsheviks, and especially her charge that they were considering an alliance with German imperialism, took matters too far, so he went to see her in prison to persuade her to desist from publishing such attacks. According to him, after a lengthy exchange she agreed not to publish the inflammatory article, though it was only the argument that her remarks would be misused by enemies that convinced her. Luxemburg proposed instead to compose a separate and much more detailed booklet on the subject, which became *The Russian Revolution*. After Levi's

departure she wrote out a draft which she sent to him in September 1918 through an intermediary, declaring in her accompanying letter "I am writing this pamphlet only for you and if I can convince *you* then the effort isn't wasted" (Nettl 1969, 430; Levi 1922, 1). The Party was less enthusiastic however. Allegedly, authorities in Moscow, possibly Lenin himself, put pressure on Levi to state publicly that Luxemburg had changed her mind about the Revolution. One of Luxemburg's biographers, Elżbieta Ettinger, even claims that in the fall of 1921 Clara Zetkin came back from Moscow with an instruction to burn the manuscript, a claim that has not been substantiated (Ettinger 1986, 226).

In *The Russian Revolution* Luxemburg presented three main criticisms of Leninist policies instituted after the Revolution. Firstly, she was against the promulgation of the right of nations to self-determination, a principle which she, a forthright internationalist idealist, had always staunchly opposed. Second, as a socialist purist, she also attacked the post-revolutionary distribution of land to the peasants. Rather than have land parceled out into small landholdings, she contended, it should have been nationalized. Ironically, at the end of the 1920s the Soviet Union was effectively to nationalize land with a "collectivization" that rendered farming subject to centrally planned control (not of course the kind of nationalization she had in mind). Luxemburg admitted that both these measures were born of expediency, necessitated by the war, the dire economic conditions, and so forth. At the same time, she cautioned that to institutionalize them would lead to drastic consequences: "The danger begins only when they make a virtue of necessity and want to freeze into a complete theoretical system all the tactics forced upon them by these fatal circumstances" (Luxemburg 1922, 118, 1970, 79).

It was the third of Luxemburg's main criticisms in the pamphlet on Leninist policies that will be our main concern here. It attracted the most polemical attention because it engages that central dilemma in the theory of revolution: how much direction and control is required and to what extent revolution can be effected by popular will. The pamphlet is best known for Luxemburg's attack on one of the early actions of the Bolsheviks in power, the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly (*Vserossiiskoe uchreditel'noe sobranie*), a constitutional body convened in Russia after the October Revolution of 1917. The Assembly met for a mere thirteen hours during January 1918, whereupon it was dissolved by the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, making the Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets the new governing body of Russia. Luxemburg's outrage at the dissolution of the Assembly, an elected body, and her insistence on the importance of suffrage in a socialist government is one of the reasons why this text is often seen as anti-Leninist, providing, some allege, an almost "clairvoyant indictment of the Bolsheviks" (e.g. Nettl 1969, 436). It was notably promoted as such by Bertram D. Wolfe, one of many prominent communists who flipped to cold warrior. His translation of the text, published in 1947 and again in 1961, served as its main English language source for many years, and his interpretation of it, laid out in his pointed and framing introduction, became the standard Cold War reading of the text itself.

The text is actually ambiguous in its evaluation of the Revolution and contains some countervailing declarations praising Lenin and his actions in the Revolution. Lenin and Luxemburg had been locked over the first two decades of the twentieth

century in back and forth polemics, but this did not mean that Luxemburg did not value and respect him. For example, in *The Russian Revolution* Luxemburg writes:

Thus it is clear that in every revolution only that party is capable of seizing the leadership and power which has the courage to issue the appropriate watchwords for driving the revolution ahead, and the courage to draw all the necessary conclusions from the situation. ... The Party of Lenin was the only one which grasped the mandate and duty of a truly revolutionary party and which, by the slogan – “All power in the hands of the proletariat and the peasantry – ensured the continued development of the revolution.” (Luxemburg 1922, 80, 81; Luxemburg 1970, 38)

Such strong endorsements of Lenin and the Revolution notwithstanding, they did not compensate in the minds of her detractors for the fact that Luxemburg was contending that the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly contravened socialist principles and threatened the very purpose of the Revolution. As Stephen Eric Bronner has put it, “The difference here does not merely involve a matter of tactics, but a fundamentally different conception of revolution itself”. In Luxemburg’s formulations, Bronner continues, “the curtailment of democracy becomes a cure that is worse than the disease” (Bronner 1981, 64).

Luxemburg’s denunciation of Lenin’s policies could not be left unchallenged. In a bid for damage control Clara Zetkin, a long-standing comrade of Luxemburg, argued that she had not really meant what she said in this booklet, or rather that she had changed her mind. In *Um Rosa Luxemburgs Stellung zur russischen Revolution*, a book she published in 1922 after *The Russian Revolution* appeared, Zetkin joined other party loyalists such as Karl Radek (in his brochure *Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Leo Jogiches*, 1919) in contending that when Luxemburg was in prison (where she wrote the pamphlet) she had been cut off from the world with very limited access to information, largely from newspapers, and became very concerned about what she heard of the Russian Revolution (Radek 1918). But when Luxemburg was released on November 8, 1918 in time to take a leading role in the Spartacist movement and its abortive attempt of 1918–1919 at revolution in Germany, Zetkin alleges, she quickly changed her mind about Leninist centralism. Then “the differences of opinion between her and us came to an end” as she followed “a firm line, the correct line”. To back this up, Zetkin cites a series of articles in the communist party mouthpiece *Rote Fahne*; they are largely unattributed, but she claims reliable sources have identified them as by Luxemburg, arguing further that since Luxemburg had become such a powerful force behind *Rote Fahne* and nothing could have been published there without her consent, the Party’s position presented there was essentially hers. The articles Zetkin cites and pronounces as Luxemburg’s “last and final testament” not only praise Lenin’s actions but also draw a distinction between the bourgeois understanding of democracy and revolutionary democracy, demonstrating to Zetkin’s mind that Luxemburg has changed her opinion on Lenin’s undemocratic actions in dismissing the Constituent Assembly (Zetkin 1922, 10, 62, 65, 66, 70, 72–73, 74, 76, 85, 103).

Zetkin also raises doubts about how final the manuscript Levi published was, revealing that she and Levi had gone to Luxemburg’s apartment after her death and,

finding her papers strewn all over the place after a police raid, had attempted to cobble together a more or less coherent manuscript. It was fragmentary, and some of the criticisms made in the exercise books they found there contradicted Luxemburg's statements elsewhere. Leo Jogiches, Luxemburg's long-term lover, the Party activist "closest to Rosa both personally and ideologically", was so "decisively against publication" that he asked Zetkin to burn the books. But Zetkin couldn't bring herself to do it and the manuscript ended up in Paul Levi's hands (Zetkin 1922, 7–8, 10).

In point of fact, Zetkin was not entirely wrong about the incomplete and problematic nature of the text Levi used. An article of 1928 by Felix Weil, the Jewish German-Argentine Marxist, who provided the funds for the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt am Main, reveals that Luxemburg's drafts in notebooks had been entrusted to a comrade for safe-keeping during the January days of 1919 and then forgotten. This meant that neither Levi nor Zetkin was using the Luxemburg original when they wrote their respective pieces on it. But recently a bundle of papers had been found in Berlin that proved to be the lost manuscript of *The Russian Revolution*. This manuscript had 108 pages, of which 87 corresponded to "The Russian Revolution" as published, and Weil speculated as to whether the most coherent section of the remainder was meant to have been incorporated in that text, or to be part of something else, but had no definitive answer. He was unable to say whether the original manuscript was substantially different from the one Levi published in 1922 or had a different import; the differences he detected consisted largely in such discrepancies as using "*Klassenwerke*" instead of "*Klassenverhältnisse*" (Frölich 1967, 241; Weil 1928, 285, 286, 287, 288).

Zetkin in her tract, however, couches her account of the publication history in Manichaean terms. She idealizes Luxemburg as "the sacred glowing heart of the proletariat", "their clearly recognized brain", and "the most brilliant head of the Marxist school". But the perfidious Levi, a "desert[er] from the camp of the proletarian revolution", who has gone over to the side of the counter-revolutionaries and "compromise[d] with the capitalists", she alleges, had essentially used this genial Marxist as a cover in pursuing his "own barbed armed conflict against the Bolsheviks". In his extended introduction, she charged, Levi misrepresented the true nature and circumstances of Luxemburg's pamphlet, identifying her position with "the camp of the reformists" (Zetkin 1922, 5, 7, 134, 132).

Indeed, the publication of Luxemburg's pamphlet on the Revolution was no innocent gesture on Levi's part. He himself provided a 63-page introduction, longer than the 53-page text itself. In it he says little about Luxemburg's text until page 54, but in the preceding sections one soon begins to suspect that Levi published *The Russian Revolution* with its purported anti-Leninist message not so much to discredit Lenin's handling of the Revolution per se, but as an indirect form of self-justification after he had been expelled for publicly criticizing the Communist Party's tactics during the March Action of 1921 (uprisings of German workers that were defeated). Now that he (so recently head of the German Communist Party) is freer to attack Bolshevik policies, Levi contextualizes Luxemburg's position not in terms of the events she analyses so much as in terms of events in the Soviet Union that had occurred more recently, since Luxemburg's death, and the policies implemented in response, contending that the Revolution

was betrayed in early 1921 and that her conclusions in *The Russian Revolution* foreshadowed this. He lists a series of Bolshevik actions that year as evidence of this “betrayal”: worker unrest put down in February and resurfacing in the ensuing Kronstadt revolt of March that was brutally suppressed by the Bolsheviks, and the announcement of the New Economic Policy (NEP) the same month (Levi 1922, 17, 15, 53, citation on 61).

In a sense both sides of this dispute were right in that Luxemburg was ambivalent about the Russian Revolution because it represented the first major—spectacularly major—triumph of the revolutionary cause but was to her disturbingly flawed. But, that said, to argue about whether in this pamphlet or in the ensuing months Luxemburg was pro- or contra- this or that Leninist measure is to miss the point. She herself always argued that revolutionary movements and revolutions as they occur are bound to prove imperfect realizations of theory. To her, the road to revolution “does not proceed in a beautiful straight line” (Luxemburg 1971, 86, 2008, 168). As she put it in “The Russian Revolution”, there “is no key in any socialist program or textbook. That is not a shortcoming but the very thing that makes scientific socialism superior to the utopian varieties” (Luxemburg 1922, 84, 1970, 70). This is because “it is not in [social democracy’s] power to bring about historical situations by resolutions at party congresses.... Man cannot keep historical events in check while making recipes for them, but he can see in advance their apparent calculable consequences and arrange his mode of action accordingly” (Luxemburg 2008, 166, 1971, 84).

Luxemburg, then, was opposed to dogmatic, prescriptive theory. The reader is hard-pressed to find statements from Marx among her writings. In this respect her texts mark a strong contrast with Lenin’s, who stated at the outset of *State and Revolution*, written in 1917 virtually on the eve of the Revolution, “that in order to re-establish Marx’s authentic doctrine on the state” “it will be necessary to adduce a whole series of lengthy quotations from the works of Marx and Engels themselves” who will be “quoted as fully as possible” (actually it is predominantly Engels he cites) (Lenin 1992, 7–8).

Luxemburg in a sense does not need chapter and verse, because for her to insist on “Marx’s authentic doctrine” and to illustrate it with quotations claimed to be canonical would be to “freeze [his ideas] into a complete theoretical system”. And yet at the same time to eschew all guiding principles and predictions would be to render the revolutionary movement potentially anarchic and directionless. How to calibrate, how to reconcile the two poles was in a sense her self-assigned task, and no easy one. She wanted her analyses to be “scientific, to be grounded in actuality and informed by Marxist theory, but in her writings she is periodically carried away as she presents visionary scenarios in a lyric tone. In such passages the revolution emerges not as an organized and purposefully pursued political event, but as an actor in its own right. We see this, for example, in a passage from “The Russian Revolution” in which she argues in favor of suffrage and retaining the Constituent Assembly as an elected body: “It is precisely the Revolution which creates by its glowing heat that delicate, vibrant, sensitive political atmosphere in which waves of popular feeling, the pulse of popular life, work for the moment as the representative bodies in the most wonderful fashion”. Earlier in the same section of the text she insists that

"the living fluid of the popular mood continuously flows around the representative bodies, penetrates them, guides them" (Luxemburg 1922, 102, 101, 1970, 61, 60).

Luxemburg's somewhat dreamy-eyed invocation of "the living fluid of the popular mood" is a figure for her signature theoretical position: her commitment to the "mass strike" and what is often called today "mass action", and her privileging of what she saw as its spontaneous nature over direction from above. Since her "Organizational Questions of Social Democracy" of 1904 (also known as "Leninism or Marxism"), she had argued for the critical importance in revolutions of direct, independent action of the masses; cutting that off was what Levi had deemed "the Bolsheviks' big mistake". "The great tragedy of the Russian Revolution", he contended in his Introduction, was the Bolsheviks "muzzling at the beginning the action of the proletarians" (Levi 1922, 61).

Luxemburg's advocacy of direct action ran counter to Lenin's ideas as outlined in two key texts: *What Is to Be Done?* (1902) and "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back" (1904). In multiple texts she challenged Lenin's insistence in these two canonical publications and elsewhere that the revolutionary masses had to be subordinated to a "vanguard of the proletariat", a highly "conscious" and educated Party elite. Luxemburg maintained, for example, that "Social Democratic Centralism cannot be based either on blind obedience or on the mechanical submission of the party's militants to their central authority", arguing further that "[Lenin's] line of thought is concerned principally with the control of party activity and not with its fertilization, with *narrowing* and not with *broadening*, with *tying the movement up* and not with *drawing it together*" (Luxemburg 2004, 252, 256). Russia's 1905 revolution was the first time that mass strikes had been successful in crippling the state. Buoyed by this, Luxemburg produced her most comprehensive formulation of her position in her famous text "The Mass Strike, The Party and the Trade Unions" (1906), which was, ironically, composed in part in response to conversations she had with Lenin in Finland about events in Russia.

In *What Is to Be Done?* (1902), Lenin had labelled revolutionary spontaneity a dangerous, revisionist concept that left revolutionary action open to arbitrary and ineffective measures. He insisted that "The history of all countries shows that the working class exclusively by its own efforts is able to develop only a trade union consciousness", and so "a 'dozen' experienced revolutionaries, trained professionally no less than the police should be charged with organizing and centralizing all the clandestine aspects of the work—the drawing up of leaflets, the working out of approximate plans". And these experienced revolutionaries would constitute "a genuine vanguard of the most revolutionary class" (Lenin 1988, 98, 187, 239). Luxemburg, however, countered in her later text on the mass strike:

There are quite definite limits set to initiative and conscious direction. During the revolution it is extremely difficult for any directing organ of the proletarian movement to foresee and calculate which occasions and factors can lead to explosions and which cannot... The element of spontaneity [*das Element des Spontanen*], as we have seen, plays a great part in all Russian mass strikes without exception, be it as a driving force or as a restraining influence. ... The revolution, even when the proletariat, with the social demo-

crats at their head, appears in the leading role, is not a maneuver of the proletariat in the open field, but a fight in the midst of the incessant crashing, displacing, and crumbling of the social foundations. In short, in the mass strikes in Russia the element of spontaneity [*das Element der Spontanen*] plays such a predominant part not because the Russian proletariat is “uneducated”, but because the revolutions do not allow anyone to play the schoolmaster with them. (Luxemburg 1971, 64–65; Luxemburg 2008, 148)

We note that the phrase “the element of spontaneity”, occurs twice in this passage, giving it greater emphasis.

Luxemburg contended that the working classes are somehow enlightened in the process of revolutionary struggle. It is the mass strike, what is often called today the mass action, often occasioned by *economic* grievances, which becomes their school where they attain *political* consciousness. Accounting for the revolutionary uprising in Petersburg in 1905, the key moment of that revolutionary year, in her “Mass Strike...” she wrote:

But this first general direct action reacted inwardly all the more powerfully as it for the first time awoke class feeling and class consciousness [*Klassenbewusstsein*] in millions upon millions as if by an electric shock....the proletarian mass, counted by millions, quite suddenly and sharply came to realize [*zum Bewusstsein kam*] how intolerable was the social and economic existence that they had patiently endured for decades in the chains of capitalism. Thereupon there began a spontaneous [*spontanes*] general shaking of and tugging at these chains....[as all over the country people] suddenly awakened by the January lightning, bethought themselves of their rights and now sought feverishly to make up for their previous neglect. (Luxemburg 1971, 45; Luxemburg 2008, 129)

We note that, as I have indicated above, in the original, German version of this passage Luxemburg’s account of the January uprising in Petersburg is effectively framed by the dialectic of spontaneity and consciousness (*Bewusstsein*) and the masses “spontaneous” actions are shown to lead to greater consciousness. However, in some less visionary passages from the same text Luxemburg comes close to the Leninist position on the need for guidance by the “vanguard of the proletariat”.

The social democrats are the most enlightened, most class-conscious vanguard of the proletariat. They cannot and dare not wait, in a fatalist fashion, with folded arms for the advent of the “revolutionary situation”, to wait for that which, in every spontaneous people’s movement, falls from the clouds. On the contrary, they must now, as always, hasten the development of things and endeavor to accelerate events. This they cannot do, however, by suddenly issuing a “slogan” for mass strike at random at any moment but make it clear to the widest layers of the proletariat the *inevitable advent* of this revolutionary period, the inner social factors making for it, and the political consequences of it. (Luxemburg 1971, 79; Luxemburg 2008, 161)

Luxemburg and Lenin, then, used similar vocabulary when tackling these issues—"spontaneity", "consciousness", and even "the vanguard of the proletariat." Their differences could be seen as differences of emphasis and weighting about the degree of guidance and centralization that was necessary for making a revolution. Though they used the same terminology, the two had different understandings of the common terms. Luxemburg wrote of a vanguard emerging from within the proletariat, spontaneously, and capable of self-direction. That was *her* "vanguard of the proletariat".

Lukács disagreed with Luxemburg on the role of "spontaneity" in revolution and saw her as somewhat naïve on this issue. In his second, 1922 chapter devoted to her in *History and Class Consciousness* he contends she had a "false view of the character of the proletarian revolution" (Lukács 1999, 273). Her analyses were "undialectical" because of her "overestimation" of the revolution's purely proletarian character" thus "underplaying the role of the party in the revolution" (Lukács 1999, 278, 274, 275). A concomitant problem was her "overestimation of the organic character of the course of history", and of "the spontaneous, elemental forces of the Revolution"; that "determine[d] her attitude to the Constituent Assembly" (Lukács 1999, 277, 279). He also saw Luxemburg's voluntarist conception of the dynamic of revolution as wrong, because "the 'economics' of socialism will [not] prevail... by virtue of their own momentum... socialism would never happen 'by itself'" (Lukács 1999, 282).

But one should not assume that Luxemburg was, as Lukács implies, an airy idealist. Like Lenin she believed in the necessity of violence in the interests of preserving a revolution, what in *The Russian Revolution* she likens to a Jacobin dictatorship. "[T]he socialist dictatorship", she says, "...cannot shrink from any use of force to secure or prevent any measures involving the interests of the whole". She is not, then, opposed to repression, but she sees the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly as a case where repression should not have been used: "...when it involves a deprivation of rights not as a concrete measure for a concrete purpose but as a general rule of longstanding effect, then it is not a necessity of dictatorship but a makeshift, incapable of being carried out in life" (Luxemburg 1922, 107, 1971, 65–66). The German expression for the nature of what the translator calls a "makeshift" here, "*lebensunfähige Improvisation*," it is to be noted, prioritizes lived experience. In fact, the dispute between Lenin and Luxemburg about how to run Russia after the Revolution might seem to involve a matter of degree of repression. How many and which parties and groups must the Revolution suppress in the interests of its success, of maintaining power? Where does one draw the line between the included and the non-included in post-revolutionary society? Luxemburg was for greater inclusiveness and disagreed with Lenin about excluding the socialist revolutionaries, but both agreed on the need to exclude what they saw as counter-revolutionary elements.

Luxemburg's, to Lenin, heretical position on the mass strike was a thorn in his side and he repeatedly attacked her for it, particularly after the Great War. It became an item of contention not just within the German communist movement, but throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Most leading communist activists and theorists in Germany operated within a field of discourse that extended from Berlin to Moscow and Petersburg; ideas and vocabulary circulated across the national borders

of this vast area, but individual communists as well who moved around in a kaleidoscopic pattern from city to city, country to country. This itinerancy was particularly found among Polish Jewish Marxists like Luxemburg and Jogiches, and other Jewish communist compatriots with whom they intersected and collaborated at different times in different cities, such as Felix Dzerzhinsky and Karl Radek. Radek and Dzerzhinsky ultimately settled in the Soviet Union (though Radek played a leading role in the two major German post-war revolutions of 1918–19 and 1923). And though Luxemburg ultimately tied her fate to the German communist movement and Berlin, her writings were to a remarkable degree preoccupied with the Russian Revolutionary movement. In her key text, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions*, one is amazed at her detailed knowledge of the myriad strikes and uprisings that took place all over Russia during those revolutionary months of 1905, including knowledge of events in fairly minor provincial towns. Clearly much of this was gained from Lenin and other Russian revolutionaries with whom she associated in Finland in the summer of 1906 when she wrote this text; but the point would be that she found the experience of Revolution in *Russia* in all its specific detail so crucial for a program for revolution in *Germany*. In the case of another of her publications, *The Accumulation of Capital: A Contribution to an Economic Explanation of Imperialism* (*Die Akkumulation des Kapitals: Ein Beitrag zur ökonomischen Erklärung des Imperialismus*, 1913), which in some respects anticipates Lenin's later tract on Imperialism (especially in Luxemburg's Chapter 26), she devotes chapters 18–24 to an informed discussion of the Russian Legal Marxists.

The Germano-Russian frame of reference persisted in Bolshevik ideological debate throughout the 1920s even though communist internationalism, which Luxemburg so fervently espoused, might seem to have been abandoned by the Bolshevik leadership around 1924 when Stalin announced a policy of socialism in one country. One sees it still, for example in Stalin's "Letter to *Proletarian Revolution*. Some Questions Concerning the History of Bolshevism" (*O nekotorykh voprosakh istorii bol'shevizma*) which was published in number 6 (113) of that journal for 1931. The main target for Stalin's attack there is an article A. G. Slutskii published in number 6 the preceding year, "Bolsheviks on German Social Democratism in the Period of its Pre-War Crisis," but Stalin in his response takes several swipes at Rosa Luxemburg, lumping her together with her ideological opponents such as Kautsky and the Mensheviks, but also with Trotsky in an incongruous mélange of the then official demons of Soviet communism. Stalin discredits Luxemburg by citing Lenin's criticism of "German Leftist Social Democrats" in his article "On the Junius Brochure" (1916), which refers to a pamphlet Rosa wrote in prison and published under that pseudonym in October 1916. In his response to the brochure, Stalin points out, Lenin accuses Luxemburg of being too timid, fearing a split in the Social Democratic movement and consequently not going far enough, siding with the Mensheviks against the Bolsheviks whom she accuses of "ultra-centralism." In consequence, Stalin maintains, she "compos[ed] a utopian and semi-Menshevik scheme of permanent revolution (a distorted representation of the Marxist scheme of revolution), which was permeated through and through with the Menshevik rejection of the political union of the working class and peasantry, and counterposed it to the Bolshevik scheme of revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and

peasantry," "a scheme later "picked up by Trotsky," implying that Luxemburg was the source of Trotsky's ideas!

At the very heart of Stalin's letter to *Proletarian Revolution* is the attack on Slutskii for contending that "so far not enough official documents have been found that attest to the decisive and uncompromising struggle of Lenin (the Bolsheviks) against centrism", a fact to which Slutskii pointed in arguing that Lenin did not sufficiently appreciate the danger of centrism in the International. "Even if we found a whole pile of such documents", Stalin continues, "Does that mean that the presence of what are just paper documents are sufficient to demonstrate true revolutionariness and true irreconcilability of the Bolsheviks regarding centrism? Who besides hopeless bureaucrats would rely on mere paper documents alone? Who besides archive rats does not understand that the Party and its leaders must be believed by their *deeds* above all and not by their declarations?" (Stalin 1951, 96).

Why did Stalin bring Rosa Luxemburg, who had after all been dead for over a decade, into this polemic with a recent Soviet article? Her presence in the "letter," essentially a manifesto, which became canonical for Marxist–Leninist–Stalinist thought until a fuller articulation of Stalin's views became available in the *Short Course of the History of the All-Russian Communist Party* in 1938, attests to her continuing prominence in communist ideological debate. It also attests to the fact that Lenin's advocacy of centralism remained a sensitive issue for Bolsheviks, especially at this time when the country was becoming more centralized and its administration more hierarchical under Stalin. Luxemburg's repeated attacks on Lenin's "ultra-centrism" struck a nerve and her pamphlet on *The Russian Revolution* and several of her other major writings cast a shadow over Stalin's "letter." They engaged a fundamental problem of communist revolution which Stalinist culture was in the process of "freezing into a complete system."

Stalin, in foregrounding "deeds" over paper records, might seem to be taking a stance against theory, but actually Rosa Luxemburg was no chapter and verse Marxist and always emphasized revolutionary practice, and so the two might seem to have important points in common. However, the import of Stalin's "letter" was to downplay the importance of historical actuality and experience, both key in Luxemburg's writings. In the letter to *Proletarian Revolution* Stalin effectively argued that Lenin was no longer to be regarded as a historical figure but more a world-historical actor fulfilling a role. Hence the function "Lenin" must be distinguished from any actual, factually observable individual. History capital H supplanted history small h.

This text by Stalin, appearing as it did in late 1931, was discussed and cited ad nauseam in 1932, the very year socialist realism was declared *the* method of Soviet literature. This was in a sense no coincidence. I have argued in *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* and elsewhere that socialist realism was less a realism per se than a literary tradition composed of conventions that were organized in a masterplot that determines the plot outline of any novel in generalized form. The center of the masterplot consisted in working out of the spontaneity/consciousness dialectic. As is generally true of ritual forms, the masterplot personalizes the general processes outlined in Marxist–Leninist historiography by encoding them in biographical terms: the positive hero passes in stages from a state of relative "spontaneity" to a higher degree of "consciousness," but this progress is assisted by some mentor figure who

is generally a senior, if not the most senior, member of the local communist hierarchy, and the hero's progress in political consciousness enables him to ascend that hierarchy, often to supersede his mentor who is promoted to a higher position elsewhere. And so the climactic moment of self-mastery is at the same time an affirmation of the Soviet status quo with the Party as absolute authority.

This masterplot, then, enacts a dialectic that is at the heart of Leninist revolutionary theory and also at the heart of Luxemburg's polemic with Lenin and the Bolsheviks. In the typical socialist realist novel, the hero's personal progress functions as an allegory for the broader processes at work in Soviet society and in its own way illustrates and endorses the general principles of revolutionary development that Lenin outlined in *What Is To Be Done?* and subsequent texts. Rosa Luxemburg's position on spontaneity a recurring and positive term in all her analyses of revolution, challenged the fundamental tenet of Leninist Marxism, that was enshrined in the socialist realist masterplot. This position Stalin crudely identifies in the "Letter" with Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution.

Though the Leninists and Stalinists were wary, then, of mass action and hence Rosa Luxemburg had to be attacked, her ideas, her advocacy of so called Spontaneism, became more attractive again in the 1960s and 1970s as leftists in Europe such as those in the autonomous movement sought alternatives to Soviet Marxism. Several editions of her work came out at that time, including a five-volume East German edition that appeared in Berlin in 1970–1975 with Karl Dietz Verlag, a successor to the old leftist publishing enterprises Neuer Weg and Vorwärts, and a three-volume edition of 1971 was published in Frankfurt-am-Main in the West. Now, when the Soviet Union has been dissolved, her influence can still be felt in, for instance, today's alter-globalization movement; and a fuller complete edition of her collected works is coming out in Germany. The debate about whether or not Luxemburg did change her mind on Lenin's conduct of the Revolution is still alive, too (Hudis et al. 2011).

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