

# Rosa Luxemburg & Trotsky

Monday 27 September 2021, by [LÖWY Michael](#) (Date first published: 1979).

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: This article, if I remember well, was published around 1979 in the French Journal *Quatrième Internationale*. If I would rewrite it today, I would probably give greater emphasis on the positive side of Rosa Luxemburg's and young Leon Trotsky's views on political organization. But I still agree with the essential argument of the paper, bringing together both thinkers, as the guiding inspirations of the Fourth International.

Since I discovered Rosa Luxemburg in Brazil, aged 15, and joined a small "luxemburgist" organization called the Independent Socialist League, myself and my comrades had the habit of referring to her as "Rosa." Was it a form of sexism? Or a way to express admiration, tenderness, proximity? I leave it to the readers to decide...

*"Of all the personalities of European socialism, nobody was in origin, temperament and political and literary gifts more akin to Trotsky than Rosa Luxemburg..."*—Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*, 183

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY ASSASSINATED Rosa Luxemburg in 1919. Stalinism, from 1925 on, wanted to purge the Comintern of this dangerous "syphilis" (in the words of Ruth Fischer, chief of German Communist Party), i.e. Rosa's ideas. Leon Trotsky on the other hand in 1935 joined her, with Lenin and Karl Liebknecht, as the three revolutionaries claimed by the Fourth International under construction.

Despite their differences, the profound communion between Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg stems from revolutionary Marxism and internationalist communism, of which they were both authentic and lucid representatives.

It is also, however, a communion marked by tragic combat against the pathological excrescence of the workers' movement as signified by its reformist bureaucracy, a combat which cost them both their lives (murders ordered by Noske 1919, Stalin 1940) and witnessed the temporary triumph of the "gravediggers" of the revolution. (Gustav Noske, a rightwing Social Democrat, was Minister of Defense in the German Weimar Republic — ed.)

We know that Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg met only rarely. In *My Life*, Trotsky describes his impression of Rosa's character at one of these meetings, the conference of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) in 1907: "Short of stature, frail, even sickly, she had noble traits,

eyes that gleamed with spirit, and could subjugate with the virility of her character and mind. Her style, strained, precise, implacable, will forever reflect her heroic spirit.”

Then he adds, revealing a certain regret, “I admired her from afar. And yet it may be that I never properly appreciated her...”

Realistically speaking, despite their limited personal interaction, there is a remarkable similarity in young Trotsky’s and Rosa’s vision of the world, their methods, their strategic aims and political theories.

They are united by their weaknesses, their errors, and their insights. Among their errors, the most significant is undoubtedly their rejection of the Leninist theory of organization.(1) Here we can see Rosa’s influence on the young Trotsky, who even mentions her explicitly in his pamphlet *Our Political Tasks* as an orthodox Marxist leader who had come out publicly against Lenin’s centralism.

It is also around this time (1904) that Trotsky first met Rosa Luxemburg. In a discussion with Marceau Pivert in 1939, Trotsky freely admitted that in that pamphlet, he defended his “very similar views to those of Rosa Luxemburg” but stressed that his subsequent experience proved that “on this question, Lenin was correct, and Rosa Luxemburg and I were not.”

Rosa and Trotsky’s error was in not distinguishing between certain one-sided formulas found in *What Is To Be Done?* and the essence of the Leninist theory of the party: the strict, rigorous, centralized organization of the revolutionary vanguard, and political orientation of the proletariat.

After the 1905 revolution, in a new 1907 preface to *What Is To Be Done?*, Lenin admitted that the pamphlet contained a few “rather maladroit or imprecise” ideas.(2) Nevertheless, he worked tirelessly for fourteen years on this solid, tempered organization, this clandestine splinter group implanted in the factories which for the first time in history had paved the way for the proletarian revolution — the Bolshevik party.

The roots of Rosa’s and Trotsky’s misunderstanding of the Leninist theory of the party (revealed on a political level by their confused and conciliatory position between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks) can be found in what could be termed their “revolutionary catastrophism.” Like Kautsky and most of the “orthodox” Marxists of the Second International, before 1914, Rosa and Trotsky believed that the fall of capitalism was inevitable and that the victory of the proletariat would be irresistible.

This “optimistic fatalism,” this naive faith in the “iron laws of history,” is the theoretical foundation of their semi-spontaneous organizational ideas, a foundation which was obviously quite shaken by the collapse of the Second International (over member parties’ support of their own imperialist governments on the outbreak of world war — ed.) in August 1914. It was no accident that precisely at the outset of World War I, Trotsky began to reconnect with the Bolsheviks.

Nevertheless, Rosa’s and the young Trotsky’s organizational error did contain a rational basis: much earlier than Lenin, they recognized the threat of the rising power of the party apparatus, the conservative tendency towards the self-preservation of the organization (which ultimately became an end in itself) — in a word, the danger of bureaucratization.(3)

Rosa Luxemburg had understood earlier than Lenin the profoundly reformist bureaucratic character of the German Social-Democratic Party instrument and its official “orthodox Marxist” ideologue, Karl Kautsky, whereas the young Trotsky had already demonstrated by 1906 in his *Results and Prospects* a sense that the conservatism of the Social-Democratic parties of Europe (and of Germany in particular) could ultimately become “an obstacle in the proletariat’s straightforward struggle for power.”(4)

## What Kind of Revolution?

Rosa's and the young Trotsky's profound intuition also revealed itself — well before Lenin's theses in April 1917 — in the formulation of a strategy for the proletarian revolution in Russia. It appears that around 1905-1906 the two arrived at similar conclusions albeit by different routes on the character of the 1905 revolution, which was for them “not so much ... the last successor of the old bourgeois revolutions as the forerunner of the new series of proletarian revolutions of the West.”(5)

At the 1907 Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party convention in London, Trotsky's speech on the Russian Revolution received Rosa's and Leo Jogisches' wholehearted approval. According to Trotsky, that speech also led to a reconciliation between them and to their collaboration in Rosa's Polish journal *Przeegląd Socialdemokratyczny*.(6)

What's more, at the 1909 conference of the RSDLP, it was Rosa who gave the speech and led the majority to take up the maxim “the dictatorship of the proletariat supported by the peasantry,” which was incidentally introduced by Trotsky in 1905.

It is for this reason that in 1931 Stalin included Rosa among the “inventors” of the “utopian project” of permanent revolution and in his papal bull entitled “Some Questions Concerning the History of Bolshevism” decided to “excommunicate” her posthumously for the sin of perpetuating Trotskyism.

One might well ask how Rosa and the young Trotsky were able to rationalize the coexistence of their organizational misunderstanding with their grasp of strategic truth. However, there may in fact be a paradoxical link between the two. Let us simply sketch out a possible hypothesis that only more in-depth research can confirm.

Before 1917, for both Rosa and Trotsky, the strategy of the Russian Revolution was articulated around two tightly-linked axes: the hegemonic role of the proletariat and the extension of the revolution in western Europe, particularly in Germany. These theories were founded on the following premises:

- 1) A remarkable analysis of the social forces in Russia and of the internal dynamic of the revolutionary process based on the 1905 model (with a certain under-estimation of the peasantry, especially by Rosa);
- 2) Europe's economic and political unity (the premise of their mistaken conception of the national question);
- 3) The revolutionary spontaneity of the European proletariat, which, spurred by the Russian Revolution, would rise up despite and against the social democratic parties (the premise of their organizational conception).

The two latter premises were the foundation of their hopes for, or even their certainty of a rapid extension of the Russian Revolution in Europe, which they felt was actually key to proletarian victory in Russia itself. Thus their strategy for the Russian Revolution was based both on correct assumptions (their analysis of Russian socioeconomic development, for example in Trotsky's *Results and Prospects*) as well as on false premises, which were incidentally the exact source of their political errors about the party and the national question.

In reality, as Trotsky subsequently recognized, the Russian proletariat, supported by the peasantry, was able to triumph and take power without outside help from a revolution in Western Europe (although naturally, it was not able to construct an isolated socialist society in Russia). The two other premises were thus totally unnecessary.

One can thus see how, with regard to each problem, 'error' and 'truth' were jumbled together in a complex and contradictory combination.

## **Russian Revolution and After**

In 1917, Lenin became 'Trotskyist' (as Kamenev complained in 1917) and Trotsky, Leninist. Armed with the *April Theses*, the Bolshevik Party led the Russian proletariat to power in October.

A few months later, even as she criticized various aspects of Bolsheviks' politics (to which we shall return presently) from her hiding place in Germany, Rosa Luxemburg sketched out a pamphlet in which she offered her enthusiastic support to Lenin and Trotsky, two names that were for her as for any other revolutionary of the era, completely inseparable.

Upon her release from prison thanks to the 1918 revolution, Rosa decided to not publish her account, having changed her mind on certain points. She had intended to rework the text, but her plans were tragically interrupted by reactionary executioners in service to the social-democrat Noske.

Three months after this ignoble crime, Trotsky wrote in the first manifesto of the Communist International (March 1919) that "We communists, united in the Third International, recognize the direct continuation of the efforts and heroic martyrdom in the long series of revolutionary generations, from Babeuf to Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg."

It was not until 1932 that Trotsky "rediscovered" Rosa. The occasion was offered, so to speak, by Stalin, who, in the above-mentioned article ("Certain Problems with the History of Bolshevism"), accused Rosa of capitulating to opportunism because unlike Lenin, she had not broken with Kautsky before 1914.

Trotsky easily destroyed this dishonest falsification with the aid of the famous letter from Lenin to Shlyapnikov from 27 Oct 1914: "I now hate and detest Kautsky most of all...R. Luxemburg was right; she understood long ago that Kautsky was only the lackey of the party majority, of opportunism."

He returned to this problem in 1935 in his article "Rosa Luxemburg and the Fourth International" to underscore that "Rosa Luxemburg understood and began much earlier than Lenin to combat how the ossified party machinery and the unions had served to put the brakes on the movement."

In reality, Trotsky "rediscovered" Rosa as he struggled against Stalinism, which had particularly sensitized him to the antibureaucratic dimension in Rosa's work, directed less against Lenin (with all due respect to certain anti-Leninists who claim to be Luxemburgists) than against that which then constituted the principal bureaucratic machine of the international workers movement: the leading apparatus of the German Social-Democratic Party, a bureaucracy against which she had struggled all her life and was responsible for her death in 1919.

Trotsky thus "rediscovered" Rosa Luxemburg as the bureaucracy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the USSR deteriorated. In 1932, as he struggled against Stalin's centralization via his polemic against Stalin's slanderous article, Trotsky "rehabilitated" Rosa and brought to light her critique of Kautsky's opportunistic centrism.

In 1935, he emphasized Rosa's opposition to the "Philistines of opportunistic bureaucracy," and to the "crusty reformist apparatus" of the Second International. There was a striking resemblance between the Communist Parties of 1935 — a parliamentary opposition, verbally revolutionary, but in

reality reformist and “moderate” — and German Social-Democracy before 1914.

It was this resemblance (which is not to say identity), this problematic commonality, that explains Trotsky’s renewed interest in Rosa, not to mention the growing understanding of his own struggles as the continuation of Rosa Luxemburg’s — except that by 1917, Trotsky had definitively absorbed the essentials of the Leninist conception of the party into his own theoretical system, with the result that his defense of Rosa Luxemburg was not without reservation.

The moral of the story was that for Trotsky, “if we disregard the incidentals or that which has already been resolved by evolution, then we may fully expect to orient our work for the Fourth International under the sign of the ‘3 Ls,’” not only of Lenin but also of Luxemburg and Liebknecht.

With this solemn proclamation, beyond the falsifications and Stalinesque lies, Trotsky reconnected with the tradition of the Third International, during which it had been decided since the death of Lenin in 1924 to commemorate the “3Ls” in January. But for Trotsky, it was not a question of a formal rehabilitation but rather of restoring the revolutionary vanguard to the precious heritage of Rosa Luxemburg’s ideas, which for the most part belonged to the arsenal of revolutionary international communism.

### **The Debate Continues**

In later times we have witnessed diverse attempts to oppose Rosa Luxemburg to both Trotsky and Lenin. See for example Gilbert Badia, historian of the French Communist Party, in his otherwise interesting and well-documented work as he gives way to the old demons of Stalinism: “We have found no identity, not even of convergence, in their respective theories... Trotsky himself affirmed a kinship that does not exist between Rosa Luxemburg’s ideas and his own.”(7)

How then can we interpret, if not as a kind of convergence, the adoption by the 1908 conference of the Social Democratic Party of Poland (SDKPIL), headed by Rosa Luxemburg, of the slogan of the dictatorship of the proletariat and supported by the peasantry, put forward by Trotsky at the very same moment? We must send G. Badia back to read works by Isaac Deutscher (an author who has now been “rehabilitated” and cited by [French Communist journal] *France Nouvelle...*), who shows with precision the similarities in the approach of these two revolutionary Marxists.

On an altogether different and less serious topic, the “New Philosopher” André Glucksmann (one-time Maoist who became a rightwing ideologue — ed.) has been trying to put Rosa Luxemburg in the same camp with Alexander Solzhenitsyn for the benefit of his crusade against the “Bolshevik terror.”(8)

In his polemic against Glucksmann, Daniel Singer humorously describes an imaginary meeting between R. Luxemburg and Solzhenitsyn: “She could not be in the same room as Solzhenitsyn without pinching her nostrils because he symbolized everything — the nationalism, the obscurantism of the Orthodox Church, the idealization of the peasantry, and the glorification of the past — all the vile stench of Holy Mother Russia, the knout, and the pogroms that she so detested... And, based on Solzhenitsyn’s criteria, what old goat is mangier than Rosa the Red, the revolutionary, the internationalist?”(9)

Yes, Rosa Luxemburg criticized Lenin and Trotsky in her renowned pamphlet on the Russian Revolution, drafted in prison in 1918 and published after her death by Paul Lévi. But her critique had nothing in common with that of the Social-Democrat reformists (Kautsky and company) or of the liberal bourgeois, to say nothing of a partisan of the Tsar-like Solzhenitsyn, to the extent that she is

clearly situated in the same camp as the Bolsheviks, the October Revolution, and the revolutionary Marxists:

“All the revolutionary honor and capacity for action [for action] which Western Social Democracy lacked were represented by the Bolsheviks. Their October uprising was not only the actual salvation of the Russian Revolution; it was also the salvation of the honor of international socialism.”

At the conclusion of her text, she insists on the distinction between the essential and the non-essential in Bolshevik politics: what is essential is revolutionary coherence, and proceeding from that, “the future everywhere belongs to Bolshevism.” (“The Russian Revolution” in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, Pathfinder Press, 1970, op. cit., 375, 395). What is secondary are tactical errors that she decries passionately but fraternally.

Rosa Luxemburg’s polemical remarks partially correspond to a very questionable conception of the tactic of alliances, which today sparks mainly historical interest: for example, her rejection of the slogan about the right of self-determination, or her opposition to the Bolsheviks’ agrarian policies (“The Land to the Peasants”).

Her position on the Constituent Assembly (whose dissolution by the Bolsheviks in 1918 she criticized) had by all appearances changed after the revolution in November 1918 in Germany and the emergence of the Workers’ Councils. In her last articles from 1918-19, she seems to have considered the power of the Workers’ Councils as contradictory to a Constituent Assembly.

The key question of democratic socialism remains unanswered: Rosa Luxemburg’s criticisms of the Bolsheviks have lost none of their urgency. On the contrary, they appear in fact prophetic in that they attracted attention to the dangers of policies that severely restricted democratic liberties as instituted by revolutionary powers in Russia:

“Without a free and untrammelled press, without the unlimited right of association and assemblage, the rule of the broad masses of the people is entirely unthinkable.... Freedom only for 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.” (Ibid., 389)

Contrary to latter-day Euro-Communists, Rosa Luxemburg supported the dictatorship of the proletariat, but she stressed that it was “a dictatorship of the class, not of a party or clique — a dictatorship of the class, that means in the broadest public form, on the basis of the most active, unlimited participation of the mass of the people, of unlimited democracy. ...”

That is the historic mission of the proletariat: “by conquering political power, to create a socialist democracy to replace bourgeois democracy – not to destroy democracy altogether.” (Ibid., 393)

Nevertheless, in the dramatic and almost untenable situation in which the Bolsheviks found themselves in 1917-18, surrounded by imperialists, threatened by white troops and foreign interventionists, how could they have done otherwise? Rosa Luxemburg responds to this pertinent objection in one of the most important passages of her entire pamphlet:

“It would be demanding something superhuman from Lenin and his comrades if we should expect of them that under such circumstances they should conjure forth the finest democracy, the most exemplary dictatorship of the proletariat and a flourishing socialist economy. By their determined revolutionary stand, their exemplary strength in action, and their unbreakable loyalty to international socialism, they have contributed whatever could possibly be contributed under such devilishly hard conditions. 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, and want to recommend them to the international proletariat as a model of socialist tactics." (Ibid., 394)

How can we fail to recognize Rosa Luxemburg's clairvoyance and the justice of her critique? How, after sixty years of bureaucratic degeneration in the USSR, can we reject the vital necessity of an unlimited democracy to safeguard the power of the proletariat? It seems that the moment has come for Marxist revolutionaries to say clearly and out loud: On the chapter on socialist democracy, it was Rosa Luxemburg who got it right.

That was in fact the point of the document on "The Dictatorship of the Proletariat and Socialist Democracy" approved by the United Secretariat of the Fourth International in 1977.(10) Was that then not adopting Rosa's conception of freedom in a workers' state?

## **Michael Löwy**

### *Notes*

1. Cf. Trotsky, Our Political Tasks: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1904/tasks/>
2. Trotsky, in his last publication Stalin (1940), declared that Lenin himself recognized the "one-sided, and therefore erroneous" theory exposed in What Is to Be Done? on the introduction of revolutionary consciousness "from outside" of the working class. Cf. Trotsky, Stalin, ed. by Charles Malamuth (New York: Stein and Day, 1967), 58.
3. Cf. E. Mandel, "The Leninist Theory of Organization," International Socialist Review, December 1970; <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mandel/196x/leninism/index.htm>
4. Judging his own book Our Political Tasks, Trotsky in 1940 emphasized that it was "immature and erroneous" in its critique of Lenin, but that it nevertheless contained "a fairly accurate characterization of the cast of thought of the 'committeemen' of those days, who have foregone the need to rely upon the workers after they had found support in the 'principles' of centralism..." — the same committeemen who were the first embryo of the bureaucracy at the heart of the Bolshevik party and whom Lenin found himself in constant struggle. Cf., Trotsky, Stalin, 62.
5. R. Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions," in Rosa Luxemburg Speaks, ed. by Mary-Alice Waters (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 203.
6. Cf., Trotsky, The Permanent Revolution, chapter IV. Cf., also, Trotsky, My Life (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 203: "At the London congress...on the question of the so-called permanent revolution, Rosa took the same stand that I did." In reality, however, on one crucial point, Rosa Luxemburg did not agree with Trotsky: for her, the Russian Revolution could never move beyond the democratic-bourgeois framework. For excellent coverage of this topic, see Norman Geras, The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg (London: Verso, 1983).
7. G. Badia, Rosa Luxemburg journaliste, polémiste, révolutionnaire, Editions sociales, 1975, 337, 813.
8. A. Glucksmann, La Cuinière et le mangeur d'hommes, le Seuil, 1975, 106.
9. D. Singer, "C'est la faute à Karl Platon," Lire, 1976, 10/18, 103-104.
10. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mandel/1985/dictprole/1985.htm>

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**P.S.**

- Against the Current No. 214, September/October 2021:  
<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc214/rosa-luxemburg-trotsky/>