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# Rosa Luxemburg from major works to intimate letters

Tuesday 21 June 2011, by [LE BLANC Paul](#) (Date first published: 14 March 2011).

**PRESENTATION ON ROSA LUXEMBURG, IN CELEBRATION OF THE NEW VOLUME "THE LETTERS OF ROSA LUXEMBURG" - AT BOOK LAUNCH ORGANIZED BY VERSO PRESS, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY, MARCH 14, 2011**

Rosa Luxemburg was born in 1871 in a Poland divided under German and Russian domination, and she was involved in revolutionary struggles of each country. Born to a cultured and well-to-do Jewish family in Warsaw, she attended the University of Zurich in Switzerland, receiving a doctorate in economics. While still a teen-ager, she became active in the revolutionary movement, soon rising into the leadership of the Social-Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland. Luxemburg's working-class internationalism, however, caused her to move to Germany to play a more substantial role in the massive and influential German Social Democratic Party (the SPD).

Luxemburg's 1899 polemic *Reform or Revolution?* challenged prominent SPD theoretician Eduard Bernstein, who saw Karl Marx's revolutionary approach as no longer relevant, and who argued that a piecemeal reform of capitalism could result in a gradual evolution to socialism. Luxemburg warned that this would "paralyze completely the proletarian class struggle," resulting not in the realization of socialism, but only the reform of capitalism. She insisted that "capitalism, as a result of its own inner contradictions, moves toward a point when it will be unbalanced, when it will simply become impossible." Such a crisis would cause its defenders to destroy whatever social reforms and democracy had been won in previous struggles. (This certainly seems true in our own time!) Workers would - sooner or later - have to use revolutionary action, Luxemburg insisted, and establish their own political rule to ensure both the political and economic democracy (rule by the people) that she saw as the core of socialism.

Analyzing mass working-class upsurges that swept through eastern and central Europe in 1905, Luxemburg believed capitalism periodically would generate spontaneous insurgencies which should be anticipated, supported and led by the organized socialist movement. She offered this perspective in her classic work *Mass Strike, Political Party, and Trade Unions*, insisting that the more cautious trade union and electoral tactics of the SPD were like the labor of Sisyphus (rolling the boulder up a hill, only to have capitalist dynamics push the gains back down again). Only a revolutionary socialist approach, she insisted, would secure permanent gains for the working class.

Aspects of Rosa Luxemburg's story can best be told, perhaps, by referring to one of her most intimate personal connections which surfaces again and again in her correspondence, over more than a dozen years. It involves her beloved Mimi, with whom she had a complex relationship. As she wrote to one friend: "Mimi is a scoundrel. She leaped at me from the floor and tried to bite me." Mimi was, of course, her cat, although not long afterwards, Luxemburg noted, after returning from Poland to Germany: "Mimi showed me she was happy with me right away and has again become high-spirited, comes running to me like a dog and grabs at the train of my dress." Another time she reported: "I get up early, go for a stroll, and have conversations with Mimi. Yesterday evening this is what she did: I was searching all the rooms for her, but she wasn't there. I was getting worried, and

then I discovered her in my bed, but she was lying so that the cover was tucked up prettily right under her chin with her head on the pillow exactly the way I lie, and she looked at me calmly and roguishly."

A myth has often been circulated about Luxemburg that she was hostile to the Russian revolutionary, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. While they sometimes differed on important matters, however, the two liked and respected each other and often were in agreement. In 1911 she wrote: "Yesterday Lenin came, and up to today he has been here four times already. I enjoy talking with him, he's clever and well educated, and has such an ugly mug, the kind I like to look at." Yet Mimi's relationship with the Bolshevik leader reflects something of Luxemburg's own: she writes that Mimi "impressed Lenin tremendously, he said that only in Siberia had he seen such a magnificent creature, that she was a baskii kot - a majestic cat. She also flirted with him, rolled on her back and behaved enticingly toward him, but when he tried to approach her she whacked him with a paw and snarled like a tiger."

Yet recollections of Mimi helped sustain her during her years of imprisonment during World War I. She wrote to a friend:

*"By the way, everything would be much easier to live through if only I would not forget the basic rule I've made for my life: To be kind and good is the main thing! Plainly and simply, to be good - that resolves and unites everything and is better than all cleverness and insistence on "being right." But who is here to remind me of that, since Mimi is not here? At home so many times she knew how to lead me onto the right road with her long, silent look, so that I always had to smother her with kisses ... and say to her: You're right, being kind and good is the main thing."*

Luxemburg was one of the greatest revolutionary theorists of the twentieth century. Indeed, the next two volumes in the English-language *Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg* will focus on economic writings which provide some of her most profound contributions to the vast and rich body of Marxist thought. She explains the imperialist expansion that arose out of the accumulation of capital, which became the title of her 1913 masterpiece. In one of her letters, Luxemburg describes her composition of this great work: "Day and night I neither saw nor heard anything as that one problem developed beautifully before my eyes." Even here, however, the process of thinking involved the great revolutionary socialist slowly pacing back and forth, as she herself tells us, "closely observed by Mimi, who lay on the red plush tablecloth, her little paws crossed, her intelligent head following me."

Luxemburg's study, *The Accumulation of Capital*, provides an economic analysis of imperialism, describes capitalism as an incredibly expansive system with dynamics similar to what would later be termed "globalization." In contrast to the views of Lenin, she saw imperialism as not restricted to "the highest stage" of capitalism. Rather, it is something that one finds at its earliest beginnings - in the period of what Marx called "primitive capitalist accumulation." It would continue non-stop, with increasing velocity and violence. She saw this as intertwined with the rise of militarism - leading to World War I and facing humanity with a choice between "socialism or barbarism," as she put it in her "Junius Pamphlet" of 1915.

More than a theorist, writer, and educator, Luxemburg was also an organizer and activist, imprisoned more than once - by Russian authorities in the wake of the 1905 revolutionary upsurge, and by German authorities for her uncompromising opposition to the First World War. She helped to form the Spartakusbund (the Spartacus League, named after the rebellious leader of Roman slaves), which rallied revolutionary socialists - workers as well as intellectuals - to do what the SPD had ceased to do: oppose war, imperialism, and capitalism. Despite her criticisms regarding the policies of Lenin and Trotsky (particularly around their restrictions of democracy), she was a supporter of their 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Shortly before her death, she helped to found the German

Communist Party.

In January 1919, against Luxemburg's warnings, some of her comrades became involved in a premature uprising. In the wake of the revolt's suppression, paramilitary groups (which consisted largely of future Nazis) were organized under the name of the Freikorps, systematically rounding up and murdering left-wing "troublemakers." Luxemburg and her close comrade Karl Liebknecht were among the victims. In his fine biography, one of her younger comrades, Paul Frölich, has told us this:

*"Physically she was not cut out for the role of heroine. She was small, and not very well-proportioned. Because of her hip illness in childhood, her walk was ungainly. Her sharp facial features were pronouncedly Jewish - a face indicating unusual boldness and determination. It provoked an immediate response, either repelling or fascinating people. Everyone felt the strength of her personality. In conversation her face reflected the range of her ever-changing impulses and feelings, from earnest meditation to unrestrained joy, from sympathy and kindness to asperity and sarcasm. ... Her large, dark and bright eyes dominated her whole face. They were very expressive, at times searching with a penetrating scrutiny, or thoughtful; at times merry or flashing with excitement. ... To the end of her life she retained a slight Polish accent, but it lent character to her voice and added a special zest to her humor. Because she was sensitive to the moods of others, she knew when to remain silent and to listen, as well as how to talk about the trivial things of life in a natural, down-to-earth, and spirited way. All this made every private moment with her a special gift."*

I want to conclude by thanking editors Anneliese [Laschitza] and Peter [Hudis] for the very special gift they have helped provide to all of us, beautifully translated by George Shriver. It is good to be here to celebrate this volume of letters and to honor our comrade Rosa Luxemburg.

**Paul Le Blanc**

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