

FRANK JACOB

ROSA LUXEMBURG

Living and Thinking the Revolution



BÜCHNER

Rosa Luxemburg

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Introduction

Rosa Luxemburg indeed counts as one of »the most interesting personalities of the 20th century.«¹ The Jewish woman from Poland was not only »a brilliant and luminous individual,«² whom Franz Mehring (1846–1919) called »the most brilliant follower of Marx,«³ but she was also without any doubt »one of Marxism’s most articulate and thorough theorists,«⁴ although Luxemburg was not a dogmatic Marxist in the negative sense of the term at all. She had a »charismatic personality«⁵ and seemed to be more politically interested than most of the women and men of her time.⁶ Her »sparkling mind always sought contradiction,«⁷ a fact that led the journalist, polemicist, and revolu-

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- 1 Annelies Laschitzka: *Im Lebensrausch, trotz alledem. Rosa Luxemburg – Eine Biographie*, 2nd edition, Berlin 1996, p. 9.
 - 2 Giuseppe Berti: *Gli scritti politici di Rosa Luxemburg*, in: *Studi Storici* 9/1968, no. 1, pp. 225–232, here p. 225.
 - 3 Gilbert Badia: *Rosa Luxemburg, Marx y el problema de las alianzas. En torno al problema de la estrategia revolucionaria*, in: *Materiales* 3/1977, pp. 166–176, here p. 166.
 - 4 Edward B. McLean: *Rosa Luxemburg – Radical Socialist. A Reappraisal on the Occasion of Her Death in 1919*, in: *Il Politico* 34/1969, no. 1, pp. 28–45, here p. 28.
 - 5 Ernst Piper: *Rosa Luxemburg. Ein Leben*, 2nd edition, Munich 2019, p. 9.
 - 6 John P. Netti: *Rosa Luxemburg. The Biography*, London/New York 2019, p. 55.
 - 7 Jörn Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn. Rosa Luxemburg*, in: Jörn Schütrumpf (Ed.): *Rosa Luxemburg oder: Der Preis der Freiheit*, 3rd edition, Berlin 2018, pp. 11–100, here p. 100.

tionary⁸ constantly into confrontation with others who did not share her thoughts, who might even have felt embarrassed by them. Since Luxemburg was neither a pure theorist like Marx nor a party leader like August Bebel (1840–1913) or Vladimir I. Lenin (1870–1924)⁹ but mainly worked as a journalist and lecturer, we can also understand her impact to be one of an »operative intellectual«¹⁰ who commented on daily events. In her works, nevertheless, Luxemburg also discussed revolution theory and therefore combined revolutionary thinking and revolutionary practice.¹¹ All in all, it is therefore no surprise that »the contradictions surrounding Rosa Luxemburg are extreme,«¹² especially since Luxemburg early on evoked emotions of all kinds as those who met her could not remain indifferent toward her.¹³ Many of Luxemburg's works also have entered world literature as those of a »brilliant polemicist«¹⁴ whose talent has remained almost unmatched until today.

Luxemburg, this »fiery woman of Jewish-Polish origin, small and slender, slightly lame from a childhood disease,« as German-British historian Francis L. Carsten (1911–1998) remarked, was »an orator who could sway the masses, a professional revolutionary who seemed to belong to the Russian world from which she came rather

8 Gilbert Badia, *Rosa Luxemburg. Journaliste, polemiste, revolutionnaire*, Paris 1975; Volker Caysa discussed Luxemburg as a philosopher: Volker Caysa: *Rosa Luxemburg – die Philosophin*, Leipzig 2017.

9 Michael Brie: *Rosa Luxemburg neu entdecken. Ein hellblaues Bändchen zu »Freiheit für den Feind! Demokratie und Sozialismus«*, Hamburg 2019, p. 10.

10 Georg Fülberth: *Friedrich Engels*, Cologne 2018, p. 12.

11 Dick Howard: *The Marxian Legacy. The Search for the New Left*, London 2019 [1977], p. 24.

12 Helen Scott: Introduction. Rosa Luxemburg, in: Helen Scott (Ed.): *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg. Reform or Revolution & The Mass Strike*, Chicago, IL 2007, pp. 1–36, here p. 1.

13 Piper: *Rosa Luxemburg*, p. 9.

14 Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 26.

than to modern Germany.«¹⁵ Luxemburg downplayed mockery about her physique with self-irony, especially since she intellectually overtowered most of those who tried to get to her with comments about her body.¹⁶ Her life, nevertheless, was determined by her search for a higher cause, as she wanted to live a politically useful life, a life that would make a difference to those who would follow in her footsteps.¹⁷ Although the socialist revolutionary tried to hide most of her private life from the public – her intimate relationship with Paul Levi (1883–1930) was unknown to the wider public before 1983¹⁸ –, her life was driven by, as German historian and Luxemburg expert Jörn Schütrumpf worded it, »an insatiable greed for life.«¹⁹ She was always looking for the positive things and was »bursting with ideas.«²⁰ In a letter to Sophie Liebknecht (1884–1964) written from prison in early January 1917, Luxemburg emphasizes her love for life beyond her political agitation when she writes: »Nothing human or feminine is alien or indifferent to me.«²¹ Luxemburg's life was nevertheless characterized by hardships – not only her four times in prison in 1904, 1906, 1915, and between 1916 and 1918²² – because she, as the late grand dame of Luxemburg research Annelies Laschitzka (1934–2018) highlighted, »fought for a better world« that was supposed to »be based on

15 Francis L. Carsten: Rosa Luxemburg, Freedom and Revolution, in: Francis L. Carsten: *Essays in German History*, London 2003, pp. 271–28, here p. 271.

16 Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 27.

17 Volker Caysa: Rosa Luxemburg – das Leben als Werk, in: Klaus Kinner/Helmut Seidel (Eds.): *Rosa Luxemburg. Historische und aktuelle Dimensionen ihres theoretischen Werkes*, 2nd edition, Berlin 2009, pp. 11–36, here p. 14.

18 Schütrumpf: *Zwischen Liebe und Zorn*, p. 28.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

20 Laschitzka: *Im Lebensrausch*, p. 9. Also see Caysa: *Leben als Werk*, p. 14.

21 Brief an Sophie Liebknecht, Wronke, Anfang Januar 1917, S. 17–19. 60 hier S. 17.

22 Peter Engelhardt: *Die Ökonomen der SPD. Eine Geschichte sozialdemokratischer Wirtschaftspolitik in 45 Porträts*, Bielefeld 2014, p. 27.

unlimited freedom and democracy«²³ and therefore became a target of anti-democratic forces.

It is consequently not surprising that Luxemburg sometimes tried to escape into solitude, and her life also had some irascible or melancholic episodes.²⁴ Her works were numerous and dealt with all the important issues of her time: reform and revolution, democracy and dictatorship, nationalism and internationalism, as well as capitalism and socialism.²⁵ Luxemburg discussed the problems of her time, i. e. politics and economic questions alike, and even kept track of the Russian Revolutions in 1917 while she was in prison. Regardless of the diversity of her writings, her »thoughts, actions and hopes were [always] directed towards the proletarian world revolution,«²⁶ and it is not surprising that, over the years, she advanced to become »the most prominent leader of the left wing of the German Social Democratic Party«²⁷ before she left it to act as one of the founding figures of the German Communist Party. Eventually, her murder made Luxemburg »both a heroine and a martyr of the socialist workers' movement.«²⁸ While her murder is one aspect of her revolutionary life that »seems to stand out,« Luxemburg's »disputes with Lenin in which she appears to represent democracy against Russian Communism«²⁹ are another one.

Depictions of Rosa Luxemburg in fiction and biographical works are therefore often based on a selective choice of perspective, depending on the identity and the role the Polish revolutionary was supposed

23 Laschitza: *Im Lebensrausch*, p. 9.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 10. Also see Letter to Sophie Liebknecht, Leipzig, July 7, 1916, in: Rosa Luxemburg: *Briefe aus dem Gefängnis*, 20th edition, Berlin 2019, p. 11.

25 Laschitza: *Im Lebensrausch*, p. 11.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 568.

27 Jason Schulman: Introduction. Reintroducing Red Rosa, in: Jason Schulman (Ed.): *Rosa Luxemburg. Her Life and Legacy*, New York 2013, pp. 1–10, here p. 1.

28 *Ibid.* On her murder see: Annelies Laschitza: *Rosa Luxemburgs Tod. Dokumente und Kommentare*, Leipzig 2010.

29 John P. Nettl: *Rosa Luxemburg*, vol. 1, London 1966, p. 1.

to have played due to her life and works.³⁰ One major public image of Luxemburg has been based on Margarethe von Trotta's film *Rosa Luxemburg* (1986), which, however, shows an »introspective woman [...] only reluctantly a revolutionary«³¹ and thereby offers nothing more than a somehow distorted view on Luxemburg's revolutionary life and actions. With regard to the studies about the Polish woman, German social democrat and later communist party member, one can say, in accordance with the French Marxist Emile Bottigelli's (1910–1975) evaluation, that most of them »are tainted with bias.«³² In particular, »Marxist evaluations of Rosa Luxemburg,« as Korean historian Jie-Hyun Lim emphasized, »have ranged from ardent advocacy to excommunication.«³³ These studies, Lim continues in his evaluation, »have been more ideological than historical, more political than ideological, and, indeed, more sectional than political.«³⁴ Jörn Schütrumpf explains with regard to these existent falsifications about Luxemburg, which today sometimes remain unchallenged by the international Left as well, that the political Left has been rather unsuccessful in finding integrative figures, but Luxemburg, Ernesto »Che« Guevara (1928–1967) and Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) could be such figures, as all three of them represent the »unity of word and action« as well

30 Laschitz: Im Lebensrausch, p. 10. For a discussion of one of Luxemburg's images in German literature see: Ute Karlavaris-Bremer: Rosa Luxemburg in Alfred Döblins Romanetralogie »November 1918«, in: Marijam Bobinac et al. (Eds.): Tendenzen im Geschichtsdrama und Geschichtsroman des 20. Jahrhunderts, Zagreb 2004, pp. 133–143. For a broader analysis see: Julia Killet: Fiktion und Wirklichkeit. Die Darstellung Rosa Luxemburgs in der biographischen und literarischen Prosa, Hamburg 2020.

31 Scott: Introduction, p. 1.

32 Emile Bottigelli: Réflexions sur un livre. Rosa Luxemburg. Mythe et réalité, in: *Le Mouvement Social* 95/1976, pp. 147–152, here p. 148.

33 Jie-Hyun Lim: Rosa Luxemburg on the Dialectics of Proletarian Internationalism and Social Patriotism, in: *Science & Society* 59/1995–1996, no. 4, pp. 498–530, here p. 498.

34 Ibid.