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Lessons of Luxemburg's inspirational, revolutionary legacy

Peter Taaffe

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**On 15 January 1919, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the finest brains of the German working class and its most heroic figures, were brutally murdered by the bloodthirsty, defeated German military, backed to the hilt by the cowardly social-democratic leaders Noske and Scheidemann. On this important anniversary, it is vital to look at Luxemburg's inspirational, revolutionary legacy.**

Their murders, carried out by the soldier Otto Runge, were decisive in the defeat of the German revolution but were also indissolubly linked to the victory of Hitler and the Nazis 14 years later. Wilhelm Canaris, the naval officer who assisted the escape of one of Rosa's murderers, 20 years later was to command the Abwehr, German military intelligence, under the Nazis. Other luminaries of the Nazi regime were similarly 'blooded' at this time for the future murderous activities in their own country and throughout Europe. Von Faeupel, the officer who, at the time, tricked the delegates to the recently-formed workers and soldiers' councils, 20 years later was Hitler's ambassador to Franco's Spain. The political power behind the throne to better-known generals was Major Kurt von Schleicher, who became German Chancellor in 1932 and a gateman for Hitler and the Nazis. But if the German revolution had triumphed then history would not,

in all probability, have known these figures or the horrors of fascism. Rosa Luxemburg, as a top leader and theoretician of Marxism, could have played a crucial, not to say decisive, role in subsequent events up to 1923 and the victory of the revolution if she had not been cruelly cut down.

Karl Liebknecht is correctly bracketed with Luxemburg as the heroic mass figure who stood out against the German war machine and symbolised to the troops in the blood-soaked trenches, not just Germans but French and others, as an indefatigable, working-class, internationalist opponent of the First World War. His famous call – "The main enemy is at home" – caught the mood, particularly as the mountain of corpses rose during the war.

But Rosa Luxemburg, on this anniversary, deserves special attention because of the colossal contribution she made to the understanding of Marxist ideas, theory and their application to the real movement of the working class. Many have attacked Rosa Luxemburg for her 'false methods', particularly her alleged lack of understanding of the need for a 'revolutionary party' and organisation. Among them were Stalin and Stalinists in the past. Others claim Rosa Luxemburg as their own because of her emphasis on the 'spontaneous role of the working class' that seems to correspond to an 'anti-party

mood', particularly amongst the younger generation, which is, in turn, a product of the feeling of revulsion at the bureaucratic heritage of Stalinism and its echoes in the ex-social democratic parties. But an all-sided analysis of Rosa Luxemburg's ideas, taking into account the historical situation in which her ideas matured and developed, demonstrates that the claims of both of these camps are false.

She made mistakes: "Show me someone who never makes a mistake and I will show you a fool." Yet here is a body of work of which, read even today almost 100 years later, is fresh and relevant – particularly when contrasted to the stale ideas of the tops of the 'modern' labour movement. They can enlighten us particularly the new generation who are moving towards socialist and Marxist ideas. For instance, her pamphlet 'Reform and Revolution' is not just a simple exposition of the general ideas of Marxism counterposed to reformist, incremental changes to effect socialist change. It was written in opposition to the main theoretician of 'revisionism', Eduard Bernstein. Like the labour and trade union leaders to day – although he was originally a Marxist, indeed a friend of the co-founder of scientific socialism, Friedrich Engels – Bernstein under the pressure of the boom of the late 1890s and first part of the 20th century, attempted to 'revise' the ideas of Marxism, which would in effect have nullified them. His famous aphorism, "The movement is everything, the final goal nothing," represented an attempt to reconcile the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) with what was an expanding capitalism at that stage.

Rosa Luxemburg, as had Lenin and Trotsky, not only refuted Bernstein's ideas but in an incisive analysis adds to our understanding of capitalism then, and to some extent today, the relationship between reform and revolution (which should not be counterposed to each other from a Marxist point of view) and many other issues. She wrote: "What proves best the falseness of Bernstein's theory is that it is in the countries having the greatest development of the famous "means of adaptation" - credit, perfected communications and trusts - that the last crisis (1907-1908) was most violent." Shades of today's world economic crisis, particularly as it affects the most debt-soaked economies of the US and Britain?

### Social democracy supports the war

Moreover, Luxemburg was amongst the very few who recognised the ideological atrophy of German social democracy prior to the First World War. This culminated in the catastrophe of the SPD deputies in the Reichstag (parliament) – with the original single exception of Karl Liebknecht – voting for war credits for German imperialism. The leaders of the SPD, along with the trade union leaders, had become accustomed to compromise and negotiations within the framework of rising capitalism. This meant that the prospects for socialism, specifically the socialist revolution, were relegated to the mists of time in their consciousness.

This was reinforced by the growth in the weight of the SPD within German society. It was virtually "a state within a state", with over one million members in 1914, 90 daily newspapers, 267 full-time journalists

and 3,000 manual and clerical workers, managers, commercial directors and representatives. In addition it had over 110 deputies in the Reichstag and 220 deputies in the various Landtags (state parliaments) as well as almost 3,000 elected municipal councillors. Apart from in 1907, the SPD seemed to progress remorselessly in electoral contests. There were at least 15,000 full-time officials under the sway of the SPD in the trade unions. This was, in the words of Ruth Fischer, a future leader of the Communist Party of Germany, a "way of life... The individual worker lived in his party, the party penetrated into the workers' everyday habits. His ideas, his reactions, his attitudes, were formed out of the integration of his personal and his collective." This represented both a strength and a weakness. A strength because the increasing power of the working class was reflected in the SPD and the unions. But this was combined with the smothering of this very power, an underestimation by the SPD leaders, indeed a growing hostility to the revolutionary possibilities which would inevitably break out at some future date.

Rosa Luxemburg increasingly came into collision with the SPD machine, whose stultifying conservative effect she contrasted to the social explosions in the first Russian revolution of 1905-07. Luxemburg was a real internationalist; a participant in the revolutionary movement in three countries. Originally a Pole, she was a founder of the Social Democratic party of the Kingdom of Poland (SDKP), in the Russian movement as a participant in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) and a naturalised German and prominent member of the SPD. She contrasted the flair and energy from below in

Russia, witnessed at first hand, to the weight the increasingly bureaucratic machine of the party and unions in Germany, which could prove to be a colossal obstacle to the working class taking power, she argued, in the event of a revolutionary eruption.

In this sense, she was more farsighted even than Lenin, who passionately absorbed in Russian affairs and who saw the SPD as the 'model' for all the parties of the Second International, and its leaders, such as Kautsky, as teachers. Trotsky pointed out: "Lenin considered Kautsky as his teacher and stressed this everywhere he could. In Lenin's work of that period and for a number of years following, one does not find a trace of criticism in principle directed against the Bebel-Kautsky tendency." Indeed, Lenin thought that Luxemburg's increasing criticisms of Kautsky and the SPD leadership were somewhat exaggerated. In fact, in his famous work, 'Two Tactics of Russian Social Democracy' of 1905, Lenin wrote: "When and where did I ever call the revolutionism of Bebel and Kautsky 'opportunism'? ... When and where have there been brought to light differences between me, on the one hand, and Bebel and Kautsky on the other? ... The complete unanimity of international revolutionary Social Democracy on all major questions of programme and tactics is a most incontrovertible fact."

Lenin recognised that there would be opportunist trends within mass parties of the working class but he compared the Mensheviks in Russia not with Kautskyism but with the right-wing revisionism of Bernstein. That lasted right up to the German social democrats' infamous vote in favour of war credits on 4 August 1914. With the

initial exception of Liebknecht and later Otto Rühle, they were the only two out of 110 SPD deputies who voted against. Indeed, when Lenin was presented with an issue of the SPD paper, 'Vorwärts', supporting war credits, he first of all considered it a 'forgery' of the German military general staff. Rosa Luxemburg was not so unprepared, as she had been involved in a protracted struggle, not just with the right-wing SPD leaders but also with the 'left' and 'centrist' elements, like Kautsky.

Trotsky also, in his famous book, 'Results and Prospects' (1906), in which the Theory of the Permanent Revolution was first outlined, did have a perception of what could take place: "The European Socialist Parties, particularly the largest of them, the German Social-Democratic Party, have developed their conservatism in proportion as the great masses have embraced socialism and the more these masses have become organized and disciplined... Social Democracy as an organization embodying the political experience of the proletariat may at a certain moment become a direct obstacle to open conflict between the workers and bourgeois reaction." In his autobiography, 'My Life', Trotsky subsequently wrote: "I did not expect the official leaders of the International, in case of war, to prove themselves capable of serious revolutionary initiative. At the same time, I could not even admit the idea that the Social Democracy would simply cower on its belly before a nationalist militarism."

### Spontaneous mass action

It was these factors, the immense power of the social democracy, on the one side,

and the inertia of its top-heavy bureaucracy in the face of looming sharp changes in the situation in Germany and Europe, on the other side, which led to one of Luxemburg's best-known works, 'The Mass Strike' (1906). This was a summing up of the first Russian revolution from which Luxemburg drew both political and organisational conclusions. It is a profoundly interesting analysis of the role of the masses as the driving force, of their 'spontaneous' character in the process of revolution. In emphasising the independent movement and will of the working class against "the line and march of officialdom", she was undoubtedly correct in a broad historical sense.

Indeed, many revolutions have been made in the teeth of opposition and even sabotage of the leaders of the workers' own organisations. This was seen in the revolutionary events of 1936 in Spain. While the workers of Madrid initially demonstrated for arms and their socialist leaders refused to supply them, the workers of Barcelona – freed from the inhibitions towards 'leaders' – rose 'spontaneously and smashed Franco's forces within 48 hours. This ignited a social revolution which swept through Catalonia and Aragon to the gates of Madrid, with four fifths of Spain initially in the hands of the working class. In Chile in 1973, on the other hand, where the working class listened to their leadership and remained in the factories as Pinochet announced his coup, the most militant workers were systematically rounded up and slaughtered.

We also saw, without a 'by-your-leave' to their leaders, a spontaneous revolutionary explosion in France in 1968 when 10 million workers occupied factories for a

month. The leaders of the French Communist Party and the 'Socialist' Federation, rather than seeking victory through a revolutionary programme of workers' councils and a workers and farmers' government, lent all their efforts to derailing this magnificent movement. Similarly, in Portugal, in 1974, a revolution not only swept away the Caetano dictatorship but meant that, in its first period, an absolute majority of votes to those standing in elections under a socialist or communist banner. This led in 1975 to the expropriation of the majority of industry. The Times (London) declared that "capitalism is dead in Portugal". This proved not to be so, unfortunately, because the initiatives from below by the working class, and the opportunities they generated, were squandered. This was because there was no coherent and sufficiently influential mass party and leadership capable of drawing all the threads together and establishing a democratic workers' state. These examples show that the spontaneous movement of the working class is not sufficient in itself to guarantee victory in a brutal struggle against capitalism.

The 'spontaneous' character of the German revolution was evident in November 1918. This spontaneous eruption of the masses, moreover, flew in the face of everything that the social-democratic leaders wanted or desired. Even the creation before this of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), which came from a split in the SPD in 1917, arose not from any conscious policy of its leaders – including Kautsky and Rudolf Hilferding, as well as the arch-revisionist Bernstein. It developed because of the indignation and revolt of the working class at the SPD's executive throttling within the party of all

objections and resistance to their policy on the war. This split was neither prepared nor desired by these 'oppositionists'. Nevertheless, they took with them 120,000 members and a number of newspapers.

## The general strike

Connected to Rosa Luxemburg's emphasis on 'spontaneity' was the issue of the general strike. Basing herself on the mass strikes of the Russian revolution, she nevertheless adopted a certain passive and fatalistic approach on this issue. To some extent, this later affected the leaders of the Communist Party (KPD) after her death. Rosa Luxemburg correctly emphasised that a revolution could not be made artificially, outside of a maturing of the objective circumstances that allowed this possibility.

However, the role of what Marxists describe as the 'subjective factor', a mass party, far-sighted leadership, etc, is crucial in transforming a revolutionary situation into a successful revolution. So is timing, as the opportunity for a successful social overturn can last for a short time. If the opportunity is lost, it may not recur for a long time, and the working class can suffer a defeat. Therefore, at a crucial time, a definite timeframe, a correct leadership, can help the working class to take power. Such was the role of the Bolsheviks in the 1917 Russian revolution.

The opposite was the case in 1923 in Germany. The opportunity of following the example of the Bolsheviks was posed but lost because of the hesitation of the KPD leaders, who were supported in this wrong

policy by, among others, Stalin. This was partly conditioned by historical experience until then, in which 'partial general strike action' featured in the struggles of the working class in the decades prior to the First World War. In this period, there were instances where governments took fright at the general strike at its very outset, without provoking the masses to open class conflict, and made concessions. This was the situation following the Belgian general strike in 1893, called by the Belgian Labour Party with 300,000 workers participating, including left-wing Catholic groups. A general strike, on a much bigger scale, took place in Russia, in October 1905, on which Rosa Luxemburg comments. Under the pressure of the strike, the Tsarist regime made constitutional 'concessions' in 1905.

The situation following the First World War – a period of revolution and counter-revolution - was entirely different to this, with the general strike posing more sharply the question of power. The issue of the general strike is of exceptional importance for Marxists. We do not have a fetish about the general strike. In some instances, it is an inappropriate weapon; at the time of General Lavr Kornilov's march against Petrograd in August 1917, neither the Bolsheviks nor the soviets (workers' councils) thought of declaring a general strike. On the contrary, the railway workers continued to work so that could transport the opponents of Kornilov and derail his forces. Workers in the factories continued to work too, except those who had left to fight Kornilov. At the time of the October revolution, in 1917, there was again no talk of a general strike. The Bolsheviks enjoyed mass support and under those conditions calling a general strike

would have weakened them and not the capitalist enemy. On the railways, in the factories and offices, the workers assisted the uprising to overthrow capitalism and establish a democratic workers' state.

In today's era, a general strike, 'generally', is an 'either-or' issue where an alternative workers' government is implicit in the situation. In the 1926 general strike in Britain, the issue of power was posed, where 'dual power' existed for nine days. In 1968, in France, the biggest general strike in history posed the question of power but for the reasons explained above, the working class did not seize it.

The German revolution of 1918-1924 also witnessed general strikes and partial attempts in this direction. The Kapp putsch in March 1920, when the director of agriculture of Prussia, who represented the Junkers and highly-placed imperial civil servants, took power with the support of the generals, was met with one of the most complete general strikes in history. Like France in 1968, the government "could not get a single poster printed" as the working class paralysed the government and the state. This putsch lasted for a grand total of 100 hours! Yet even with this stunning display of the power of the working class, it did not lead to a socialist overturn, precisely because of the absence of a mass party and leadership capable of mobilising the masses and establishing an alternative democratic workers' state. In fact, the erstwhile followers of Luxemburg in the newly-formed Communist Party made ultra-left mistakes in not initially supporting and strengthening the mass actions against Kapp.

## The role of a revolutionary party

The issue of leadership and the need for a party is central to an estimation of Rosa Luxemburg's life and work. It would be entirely one-sided to accuse her, as has been attempted by some critics of both her and Trotsky, of 'underestimating' the need for a revolutionary party. Indeed, her whole life within the SPD was bent towards rescuing the revolutionary kernel within this organisation from reformism and centrism. Moreover, she herself built up a very 'rigid, independent organisation', that is a party, with her co-worker Leo Jogiches in Poland. However, her revulsion at the ossified character of the SPD and its 'centralism' meant that she did, on occasion, 'bend the stick too far' the other way. She was critical of Lenin's attempt to create in Russia a democratic party but one that was 'centralised'.

On the split between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, Luxemburg she was a 'conciliator' in her approach, as was Trotsky (shown in his participation in the 'August bloc'). She sought unity between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks in Russia. But after the Bolsheviks had won four fifths of the organised workers in Russia by 1912 a formal split took place between them and the Mensheviks. Lenin understood before others that the Mensheviks were not prepared for a struggle going beyond the framework of Russian landlordism and capitalism. Lenin's approach was vindicated in the Russian revolution, with the Mensheviks ending up on the other side of the barricades. Following the 1917 Russian revolution, Rosa Luxemburg did come close to Bolshevism subsequently and became part of its international trend, as did Trotsky.

The main charge that can be made against Luxemburg, however, is that she did not sufficiently organise a clearly delineated trend against both the right of the SPD and the centrists of Kautsky. There were some criticisms both at the time and later that suggested that Luxemburg and her 'Sparticist' followers should have immediately split with the SPD leaders, certainly following their betrayal at the outset of the First World War. Indeed Lenin, as soon as he was convinced of the betrayal of social democracy – including the 'renegade Kautsky' – called for an immediate split, accompanying this with a call for a new, Third International. A political 'split' was undoubtedly required, both from the right and 'left' SPD. Rosa did this, characterising the social democracy as a "rotten corpse".

The organisational conclusion from this was of a tactical rather than a principled character. Moreover, hindsight is wonderful when dealing with real historical problems. Rosa Luxemburg confronted a different objective situation to that facing the Bolsheviks in Russia. Spending most of their history in the underground, with a relatively smaller organisation of cadres, the Bolsheviks necessarily acquired a high degree of 'centralisation', without, at the same time, abandoning very strong democratic procedures. There was also the tumultuous history of the Marxist and workers' movement in Russia, conditioned by the experience of the struggle against Narodya Volya (People's Will), the ideas of terrorism, the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, the split between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, the first world war, etc. Rosa Luxemburg confronted an entirely different situation, as a minority, and



somewhat isolated in a 'legal' mass party with all the attributes described above.

Although she was a naturalised German citizen, Luxemburg was considered an 'outsider', particularly when she came into conflict with the SPD leadership. Indeed, despite this, Luxemburg's courage and fortitude shines through when one reads the speeches and criticisms that she made of the party leadership over years. She criticised the "clinging mists of parliamentary cretinism", what would be called "electoralism" at the present time. She even lacerated August Bebel, the 'centrist' party leader who increasingly "could only hear with his right ear". At one stage, accompanied by Clara Zetkin, she said to Bebel: "Yes, you can write our epitaph: 'Here lie the last two men of German social democracy'." She castigated the SPD's trailing after middle-class leaders in an excellent aphorism appropriate to those who support coalitionism today. She wrote that it was necessary "to act on progressives and possibly even liberals, than to act with them".

But a vital element of Marxism, in developing political influence through a firm organisation or a party, was not sufficiently developed by Rosa Luxemburg or her supporters. This does not have to take the form necessarily, on all occasions, of a separate 'party'. But a firmly-organised nucleus is essential in preparing for the future. This, Luxemburg did not achieve, which was to have serious consequences later with the outbreak of the German revolution. Rosa Luxemburg and Leo Jogiches correctly opposed "premature splits". Luxemburg wrote: "It was always possible to walk out of small sects or small coteries, and, if one does not want

to stay there, to apply oneself to building new sects and new coteries. But it is only an irresponsible daydream to want to liberate the whole mass of the working class from the very weighty and dangerous yoke of the bourgeoisie by a simple 'walk out'."

## Working in mass organisations

Such an approach is entirely justified when a long-term strategy is pursued by Marxists within mass parties. Such was the approach of Militant, now the Socialist Party, when it worked successfully within the Labour Party, in the 1980s, in Britain. Militant established perhaps the most powerful position for Trotskyists, in Western Europe at least, probably since the development of the international Left Opposition.

But such an approach – justified at one historical period – can be a monumental error at another, when conditions change and particularly when abrupt revolutionary breaks are posed. Rosa Luxemburg and Jogiches could not be faulted for seeking to organise within the social democracy for as long as possible and, for that matter, the USPD later. Indeed, Lenin, in his eagerness to create mass communist parties in the aftermath of the Russian revolution, was sometimes a little impatient and premature in his suggestions for splitting from social-democratic organisations. He proposed a rapid split of the communists from the French Socialist Party in 1920 but changed his mind after Alfred Rosmer, in Moscow during that year, suggested that the Marxists would need more time to bring over the majority to the stand of the Communist (Third) International.

Even Lenin, while proposing a split from the Second International and the formation of the Third International, following the August 1914 debacle, was even prepared to amend his position if events did not work out as he envisaged. For instance, on the issue of the Third International he wrote: "The immediate future will show whether conditions have already ripened for the formation of a new, Marxist International... If they have not, it will show that a more or less prolonged evolution is needed for this purging. In that case, our Party will be the extreme opposition within the old International – until a base is formed in different countries for an international working men's association that stands on the basis of revolutionary Marxism." When the floodgates of revolution were thrown open in February 1917 in Russia, and the masses poured onto the political arena, even the Bolsheviks – despite their previous history – had about 1% support in the soviets, and 4% by April 1917.

The real weakness of Luxemburg and Jogiches was not that they refused to split but that in the entire preceding historical period they were not organised as a clearly-defined trend in social democracy preparing for the revolutionary outbursts upon which the whole of Rosa Luxemburg's work for more than 10 years was based. The same charge – only with more justification – could be levelled at those left and even Marxist currents that work or have worked in broad formations, sometimes in new parties. They have invariably been indistinguishable politically from the reformist or centrist leaders. This was the case in Italy in the PRC where the Mandelites (now organised outside in Sinistra Critica) were supporters of the 'majority' of

Bertinotti until they were ejected and then left the party. The SWP's German organisation (Linksruck, now Marx 21) pursues a similar policy within Die Linke (the Left party) today as the left boot of the party and consequently will not gain substantially.

Luxemburg politically did not act like this but she did not draw all the organisational conclusions, as had Lenin, in preparing a steeled cadre, a framework for a future mass organisation, in preparation for the convulsive events that subsequently developed in Germany. It was this aspect that Lenin subjected to criticism in his comments on Rosa Luxemburg's 'Junius' pamphlet, published in 1915. Lenin conceded that this was a "splendid Marxist work" although he argued against confusing opposition to the First World War, which was imperialist in character, and legitimate wars of national liberation. But Lenin, while praising Luxemburg's pamphlet, also comments that it "conjures up in our mind the picture of a lone man [he did not know Rosa was the author] who has no comrades in an illegal organisation accustomed to thinking out revolutionary slogans to their conclusion and systematically educating the masses in their spirit".

Here lie some of the differences between Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg. Lenin systematically trained and organised the best workers in Russia in implacable opposition to capitalism and its shadows in the labour movement. This necessarily involved clearly organising a grouping, 'faction' – one that was organised as well as based on firm political principles. Lenin organised for future battles, including the revolution.

Rosa Luxemburg was an important figure in all the congresses of the Second International and generally carried the votes of the Polish Social Democratic party in exile. She was also a member of the International Socialist Bureau. However, as Pierre Broué points out: “She was never able to establish within the SPD either a permanent platform based on the support of a newspaper or a journal or a stable audience wider than a handful of friends and supporters around her.”

The growing opposition to the war, however, widened the circle of support and contacts for Luxemburg and the Spartacist group. Trotsky sums up her dilemma: “The most that can be said is that in her historical-philosophical evaluation of the labour movement, the preparatory selection of the vanguard, in comparison with the mass actions that were to be expected, fell too short with Rosa; whereas Lenin – without consoling himself with the miracles of future actions – took the advanced workers and constantly and tirelessly welded them together into firm nuclei, illegally or legally, in the mass organisations or underground, by means of a sharply defined programme.” However, Luxemburg did begin after the revolution of November 1918 her “ardent labour” of assembling such a cadre.

### A programme for workers’ democracy

Moreover, Luxemburg posed very clearly the ideological tasks: “The choice today is not between democracy and dictatorship. The question which history has placed on the agenda is: bourgeois democracy or

socialist democracy for the dictatorship of the proletariat is democracy in a socialist sense of the term. The dictatorship of the proletariat does not mean bombs, putsches, riots or ‘anarchy’ that the agents of capitalism claim.” This is an answer to those who seek to distort the idea of Karl Marx when he spoke about the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, which in today’s terms, as Luxemburg pointed out, means workers’ democracy. Because of its connotations with Stalinism however, Marxists today, in trying to reach the best workers, do not use language which can give a false idea of what they intend for the future. This, unfortunately, includes the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, which can be construed as connected to Stalinism. The same idea is expressed in our call for a socialist, planned economy, organised on the basis of workers’ democracy.

The German revolution not only overthrew the Kaiser but posed the germ of a workers government through the institution of a network of workers and sailors’ councils on the lines of the Russian revolution. A period of dual power was initiated and the capitalists were compelled to give important concessions to the masses such as the eight-hour day. But the social-democratic leaders like Gustav Noske and Philipp Scheidemann conspired with the capitalists and the reactionary scum in the Freikorps (predecessors of the fascists) to take their revenge. General Wilhelm Groener, who led the German army, admitted later on: “The officer corps could only cooperate with a government which undertook the struggle against Bolshevism ... Ebert [the social-democrat leader] had made his mind up on this ... We made an alliance against Bolshevism ... There ex-

isted no other party which had enough influence upon the masses to enable the re-establishment of a governmental power with the help of the army.” Gradually, concessions to the workers were undermined and a vitriolic campaign against the ‘Bolshevik terror’, chaos, the Jews, and particularly, “bloody Rosa” was unleashed. Bodies like the Anti-Bolshevik League organised its own intelligence service and set up, in its founder’s words, an “active anti-communist counter-espionage organisation”.

In opposition to the slogan ‘All power to the soviets’ – the slogan of the Russian revolution – the reaction led by Noske’s Social Democrats mobilised behind the idea of “All power to the people”. This was their means of undermining the German ‘soviets’. A ‘constituent assembly’ was posed as an alternative to Luxemburg and Liebknecht’s ideas of a national council of soviets to initiate a workers and farmers’ government. Unfortunately, the muddled centrist lefts, whose party grew enormously as the social-democratic leaders lost support, let slip the opportunity to create an all-Germany council movement.

The discontent of the masses was reflected in the January 1919 uprising. Such stages are reached in all revolutions when the working class sees its gains snatched back by the capitalists and comes out onto the streets; the Russian workers in the July Days of 1917 and the May Days in Catalonia in 1937 during the Spanish revolution. The events of the German revolution were dealt with in *Socialism Today* (Issue 123, November 2008) and *The Socialist* (Issue 555, 4 November 2008).

The July Days in Russia developed four months after the February revolution whereas in Germany the uprising took place a mere two months after the revolutionary overturn of November 1918. This itself is an indication of the speed of events that developed in Germany at this stage. Given the isolation of Berlin from the rest of the country at that stage, a setback or a defeat was inevitable. But this became all the greater for the working class with the murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. It was as if both Lenin and Trotsky had been assassinated in Russia in July 1917. This would have removed the two leaders whose ideas and political guidance led to the success of the October revolution. Lenin – extremely modest on a personal level – was quite aware of his own vital political role and took steps, by going into hiding in Finland, to avoid falling into the hands of the counter-revolution.

Despite the urging of those like Paul Levi to leave Berlin, both Luxemburg and Liebknecht remained in the city, with the terrible consequences that followed. There is no doubt that Luxemburg’s sure political experience would have been a powerful factor in avoiding some of the mistakes – particularly ultra-left ones – which were subsequently made in the development of the German revolution. In the convulsive events of 1923 in particular, Rosa Luxemburg with her keen instinct for the mass movement and ability to change with circumstances, would probably not have made the mistake made by Heinrich Brandler and the leadership of the KPD, when they let slip what was one of the most favourable opportunities in history to make a working-class

revolution and change the course of world history.

Luxemburg and Liebknecht are in the pantheon of the Marxists greats. For her theoretical contribution alone, Rosa Luxemburg deserves to stand alongside Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky. Those who try and picture her as a critic of the Bolsheviks and the Russian revolution are entirely false. She hailed the work of Lenin and Trotsky. Her book written in prison in 1918 – in which she criticised the Bolshevik regime – was a product of isolation, which she was persuaded not to publish and did not pursue later when released from prison. Yet still in her most erroneous work she wrote of the Russian revolution and the Bolsheviks: “Everything that 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... Their October uprising was not only the actual salvation of the Russian revolution; it was also the salvation of the honour of international socialism”. Only malicious enemies of the heroic traditions of the Bolshevik party circulated this material after her death in an attempt to divide Luxemburg from Lenin, Trotsky, the Bolsheviks and the great work of the Russian revolution.

Luxemburg made mistakes on the issue of the independence of Poland. She was also wrong on the difference between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks (even in July 1914 supporting the opportunists who stood for the ‘unity’ between them) and, as Lenin pointed out, also on the economic ‘theory of accumulation’. But also in the words of Lenin, “In spite of her mistakes she was – and remains for us – an

eagle”. So should say the best workers and young people today who have occasion to study her works in preparation for the struggle for socialism.