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Political theory

# Luxemburg and Trotsky on Russian Revolution

- Features -

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**The so-called “Leninist” orthodoxy is history, and the campaign that Stalin and his ideologists launched for decades against “Luxemburgism”, which they identified since 1931 with their most hated nightmare, “Trotskyism”, has fallen into oblivion. So we are free to examine the Marxist theories on the structure of the Russian society and the prospects of a revolutionary uprising against the rule of the Czar – written a century ago –, in order to explore the capacity of these theories to present an explanation of the state of affairs – one hundred years ago – and a prognosis of its future development (in and after 1917). [1]**

In 1882 Marx and Engels tried to answer Vera Sassulitsch’s (the Russian revolutionary’s) question if it was possible to use the institution of the Russian village community, the so-called Mir or Obschtschina, as a starting point for a non-capitalist development of the country instead of waiting till the progress of the market-society would have ruined these archaic forms of collective land-owning as it had already done in the Western societies. In the introduction to the second Russian edition of their “Communist Manifesto” the authors gave an affirmative, but qualified answer: “If the Russian revolution will give the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both revolutions will complement one another, then it is possible, that the now existing communal property becomes the starting point of a communist development of the country.”

The question of the preconditions, actors and aims of a revolution against Russian absolutism became critical in 1905, when, after the defeat of the Czarist army in the war against Japan, a wave of mass strikes, mutinies and uprisings brought the Czarist regime into trouble. One of the first Russian socialists who came back to Russia out of the western European countries, where he had lived as a political refugee, was the 25 year old Trotsky. The ingenious autodidact (who later became an outstanding Marxist historian and political sociologist) had studied the Marxist literature of his times during five years of imprisonment and the following deportation to Siberia. In October he became the spirit and the voice of the famous workers’ council of St. Petersburg, which acted for 50 days as a revolutionary counterpart to the Czarist government. [2] Rosa Luxemburg, who observed the events in Poland and Russia and commented them with great enthusiasm, arrived in Warsaw at the end of the year and tried in the next two months (before she also was imprisoned) with the help of her own party, the “Social democracy of the kingdom of Poland and Lithuania” (SDKPiL), to accelerate the Polish revolution. Luxemburg (who was 8 years older than Trotsky) had escaped from Poland in 1889 and obtained a doctorate in social science at the University of Zurich in 1897. Her most important political arena was the German Social Democratic Party, where she – situated on the left wing of the organization – first struggled against the reformist theory of Eduard Bernstein and later stood in opposition also against the “orthodox” centre of Karl Kautsky. In 1913 she published an important contribution to the Marxist theory of imperialism (The Accumulation of Capital).

Trotsky and Luxemburg were professional revolutionaries and multilingual writers, and they were always prepared to oppose against the majority of the organizations they belonged to, if they thought, that this was their revolutionary duty. Even their comrades often considered them to be “outsiders”. If we were to characterize the relationship between these two revolutionary Marxists, we could say that their intellectual and political affinity was so great, that they had to keep a certain personal distance. We don’t know if they reciprocally took note of their writings before 1914, but we cannot find any quotations or critical remarks that could prove such reading. [3]

Trotsky developed his own conception of the Russian revolution – that differed sharply from that of the other Social Democratic theorists’ – in his history of the events of 1905 (Our Revolution, 1906). Luxemburg’s characterization of the Russian and Polish revolution was a more implicit one, presented in the form of concise theses and remarks, scattered over a dozen of her articles and booklets, written between 1904 and 1907. In the second half of 1904 Trotsky was engaged in a vivid intellectual partnership with Alexander Parvus-Helphand in Munich. Parvus had been

a sharp critic of Bernstein's "revisionism". The seizure of power by the proletariat did not appear to him as a far away event, but as "a practical task of the present". Parvus acquainted Trotsky with Marx's concept of "permanent revolution", and Trotsky developed, starting from this formula, a very special new theory of the Russian – and international – revolution that he expected. Several theorists of the left wing and of the centre of the Social Democracy of those days thought, that the events of 1905 in Russia were an exquisite example of an uninterrupted revolution that moved forward from one phase or stadium to the next. Parvus and David Rjasanow, Franz Mehring and Karl Kautsky, sometimes also Lenin spoke of a "permanent" revolutionary process. They were convinced that the uprising Russian workers and farmers would replace the Czarist regime by a democratic republic, but they did not think that the mass movement could eventually transcend the frame of capitalism. But just this possibility was Trotsky's as well as Luxemburg's main interest. "In the question of the so-called permanent revolution Luxemburg took the same principal position as myself", Trotsky wrote in retrospect in his autobiography (My Life, 1929), and we may add, that in the social democratic movement before 1914 both of them were (also in this question) in the minority.

The Russian Mensheviks (especially Plekhanov and Axelrod) saw in the West-European social development (from feudalism to capitalism, from serfdom to "free" labor, from absolutism to parliamentary democracy) a succession of certain stages or phases. And they assumed that delayed (or backward) societies, which tried to keep up with the advanced capitalist states, also had to repeat all these steps on the ladder of progress. For Russia they expected, that the coming revolution would overthrow the Czarist rule, that the revolutionaries would organize an election of representatives for a constituent assembly and then would begin with the distribution of the large estates. The task of the working class led by the Social Democrats would be the vigorous support of the anti-feudal mass movement in order to create the best conditions for the enforcement of social reforms in the post-revolutionary period of the further capitalist development (in the political frame of bourgeois democracy) and – for a future anti-capitalist revolution.

The Bolsheviks around Lenin were convinced that the Russian "liberal" bourgeoisie was neither interested in nor capable of fighting side by side with the workers' movement against the Czar and the big landowners. Confronted with a revolutionary situation, the bourgeois parties would side with the old regime (as they had already done in the French Revolution of 1848). Therefore the workers' organizations had to take over the urban leadership of the huge rural majority. Since the main interest of the farmers was the re-distribution of the land (its division into private lots), the workers' movement would not be able to transcend the frame of a capitalist democracy. Lenin thought the political result of the revolution would be a coalition-government of a workers' and of a farmer's party. He called the non-socialist post-revolutionary regime a "democratic dictatorship of the workers and farmers". [\[4\]](#)

Trotsky on the other hand argued that neither Plekhanov's nor Lenin's conception met the peculiarity of the Russian social structure and its dynamics. The Russian society of the early 20th century was not simply a retarded one, but the product of a combined development. The wooden plow and the Obschtschina coexisted with the most modern industrial enterprises, analphabetic millions suffered from the "idiotism of rural life" while urban elites and qualified workers dreamed of a parliamentary republic and of modernization in the American way. Therefore the future development of Russia would upset the model of a progress in well-defined stages. Different periods interfered with each other; intermediate states could be jumped over... The rural majority needed an urban leadership, and the Russian bourgeoisie was too weak to fulfill this task. Therefore another urban class had to play this role.

And so it was not only possible, but plausible, that in a backward country (with combined development, like Russia) a workers' government would come to power – earlier than in one of the imperialist states of higher capitalist development. [\[5\]](#) Once in power the workers' parties would not restrict themselves to improve the development of national capitalism and to improve their own living conditions by social reforms, but would head to take measures against the capitalist institutions. The destiny of the proletarian revolution – in great distress between the anti-socialist peasant-majority and the imperialist Great Powers – would be determined by the further development of the international socialist revolution.

In Rosa Luxemburg's commentaries on the events in Russia in 1905 and 1918 we find all the facets of the theory of permanent revolution as it was sketched by Parvus and then completed by Trotsky: the special character of the Czarist State and of the Russian cities, the perspective, that in backward Russia the urban, industrial proletariat (under leadership of a socialist party) would transform the (formal) bourgeois revolution into a proletarian one and create a socialist regime [6], the prognosis, that a post-capitalist society could not be realized in a single country but only by the future cooperation of highly developed socialist republics.

In her criticism of the Bolshevik policy, written 1918 (while she was still held in custody in Breslau), she anticipated, that the (inevitable) parceling of the land amongst millions of private farms, the acceptance of the right of self-determination and separation of nations (that were still under bourgeois rule), the repurchase of democratic liberties and the (reactive) proclamation of "red terror" (after the uprising of the Social Revolutionaries and during the war against the White Armies and the imperialist interventionist troops) would produce unsolvable problems at least till a victorious workers' revolution in the most advanced European countries (especially in Germany) would rescue the Russian "outpost of world revolution". As we know, Stalin later – in the thirties and forties – tried to "solve" these resultant problems of the Bolshevik policy by mass-terror: enforced collectivization, repression or deportation of "disloyal" nations and prophylactic elimination of each possible oppositional tendency. The Stalinist terror condemned millions of Russian citizens to death and destruction and reduced the socialist experiment of 1917 to only one of its achievements and preconditions: the nationalized means of production (under exclusive control of the party's and state's bureaucracy).

In the most fascinating chapter (IV) of Luxemburg's criticism of the Bolshevik policy in the first year after the October Revolution she strongly objected to the restrictions of civil liberties (freedom of opinion, of assembly and of the press). This was an updated repetition of her polemic against Lenin's concept of a centralized conspiratorial party-organization – written in 1904 [7] – and a true manifest of workers' democracy. Other critics of Lenin in the debate on the appropriate organizational form of the Russian Social Democratic-Party in 1904 were David Rjasanow, Parvus and Trotsky. Especially Trotsky's arguments against Lenin's "organizational fetishism" and his "substitutism" resembled very much those of Luxemburg. The critics of Lenin thought, that a genuine socialist party should be strong enough to struggle against the capitalist state (and therefore needed a centralist organization), but at the same time it should realize in its inner structure a free association of comrades. They looked at the party as a microcosmic model of a future, "dying" socialist state. Lenin had compared the Social Democrats with the French Jacobins of the 18th century. Trotsky argued: "The Jacobins were Utopians; we aspire to express the objective trend. They chopped off heads; we enlighten them with class consciousness." [8] Some "Leninists" seemed to dream not of the dictatorship of the proletariat but of a dictatorship over the proletariat. Luxemburg seconded Trotsky: It was a mistake to think, that as long as the workers were not yet able to control their party, the control of the workers by a central committee would be a good substitute. 14 years later, when Lenin was the head of the "Council of the People's commissars" and Trotsky organized the Red Army, Luxemburg updated her criticism:

"Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinions, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element. Public life gradually falls asleep; a few dozen party leaders of inexhaustible energy and boundless idealism direct and rule. Among them, in reality, only a dozen outstanding heads do the leading and an elite of the working class is invited from time to time to meetings where they are to applaud the speeches of the leaders and to approve proposed resolutions unanimously..." But this would not be the dictatorship of the proletariat, but the dictatorship of a clique, a dictatorship of the bourgeois – or Jacobin – type. [9]

Nobody in the Bolshevik staff liked this warning, nor did Trotsky, who (in 1920) defended the revolutionary terror by pointing to the destiny of the Paris Commune, that had existed only for two months and then had been smashed by counterrevolutionary troops. [10] But after three and a half years of war the small Russian working class had nearly been annihilated. Now the Bolshevik party – "a vanguard without class", as Schljapnikow, the leader of one of the first op-positional groups within the party, said – was really in the position of the Jacobins. They had to rule "in the name"

of the class, which had become unable to control the revolutionary government – and later on the Stalinist organization used its whole power to repress every oppositional motion. In March 1921 the participants of the X. Congress of the Communist Party declared the transition to the so-called New Economic Policy and made the decision to suppress the anti-Bolshevik uprising of Kronshtadt. In addition they tried to secure the unity (or “monolithism”) of the (last not forbidden) party by prohibiting any organization of factions. The consequence of this prohibition was a long lasting paralysis of the inner political life of the party and that meant: the incapacity to change the political course of its ruling (Stalinist) faction. Till 1923 something like the October Revolution could not be reproduced in any other European country and so the Bolshevik Party had to cope with the burden of international isolation. In fear of a Russian “Thermidor” – the “bureaucratic degeneration” of the revolution – in the autumn of 1923 an informal “Left Opposition” tried to change the inner-party regime. Trotsky took up again his own (and Luxemburg’s) anti-substitutionalist argumentation of 1904, but he didn’t doubt the one-party-rule, the prohibition of factions or general secretary Stalin’s position of power. Once more he tried to combine centralism with spontaneity: “The party has to subdue its machine without ceasing to be a centralized organization.” “The most important danger is the tendency to oppose the some thousand leading comrades to the mass of the [400.000] members of the party and to see in this mass only a passive object of control (by the leadership).” But even this was too much for the troika (Stalin, Zinoviev, Kamenev) that in those days secretly manipulated the meetings and decisions of the politburo. In January 1924 the 13th Party Conference condemned the new opposition as a “petty-bourgeois deviation”. This was the beginning of the struggle against what the Stalinists later on called “Trotskyism”. “Trotsky protested [in 1923] against the irrational self-suppression of Bolshevism which, however, followed ineluctably from the suppression by Bolshevism of all its enemies”, comments Isaac Deutscher, his biographer. But “in truth, the Bolshevik bureaucracy was already the only or-ganized and politically active force in society and state alike. It had appropriated the political power which had slipped from the hands of the working class; and it stood above all social classes and was politically independent of them all.” [\[11\]](#)

Luxemburg and Trotsky were deeply convinced that the German and the Russian workers would be able to overcome the capitalist class and the capi-talist state in the near future. But they also reckoned with the possibility, that in the post-revolutionary society the proletariat would be subjugated by a bureaucratic dictatorship and that the new privileged caste of functionaries would present their regime just as the “real existing” form of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”. They were preaching to the winds. Stalin’s tyranny, a totalitarian system that killed millions of Russians even in times of peace, in the thirties annihilated the remnants of Lenin’s and Trotsky’s old party and destroyed the spontaneity of the Russian people for some generations. Luxemburg was killed in January 1919 by counterrevolutionary soldiers in Berlin. Trotsky survived her for 21 years. Since 1929 living in exile, he was killed by a Stalinist agent. On the eve of the Second World War, in 1938, he founded a new, anti-Jacobin, radical democratic (Fourth) International in order to overcome the totalitarian regimes and the bureaucratization of the world.

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[\[1\]](#) This article was written as a paper for a seminar sponsored by the Luxemburg-foundation in Istanbul, November 22-23 2013,

[\[2\]](#) Cf. Trotsky, Leon (1909; 1922): Die russische Revolution 1905. [Nasha revoluitsija, 1906.] Berlin (VI-VA) 1923. [The Russian Revolution of 1905.] Esp. the chapter on “The formation of the Soviet” [“Die Entstehung des Arbeiter-Delegiertenrates”], p. 86-92.

[\[3\]](#) “Agreeing so closely, they may have had little to say to each other”, wrote Isaac Deutscher, Trot-sky’s biographer. Deutscher, I. (1954): The Prophet Armed. Trotsky: 1879-1921. London (Oxford University Press), p. 183.

[\[4\]](#) In April 1917 he changed his mind and prepared his party for an armed uprising against the Provi-sional Government in order to create a socialist one.

[\[5\]](#) Deutscher’s résumé: “Trotsky would be the first to say that the revolution would of its own momentum pass from the bourgeois to the socialist stage, and establish a proletarian dictatorship in Russia, even before the advent of revolution in the West.” L. c., p. 105.

## Luxemburg and Trotsky on Russian Revolution

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[6] Before 1917 only Trotsky anticipated, that a revolutionary regime – born out of a proletarian revolution – would not be able to restrict itself to the creation of a democratic-capitalist order, but had to initiate a dictatorship of the proletariat. In her writings before 1917 Luxemburg did not try to resolve the contradiction between her thesis, that the driving force of the revolution in Russia (in 1905 and in future) was the urban industrial proletariat, and her other thesis, that the outcome of this proletarian revolution would be a capitalist republic. As an example I present here some quotations from her booklet on the revolution of 1905 (outlined as a history of the Russian combined economic-political mass-strikes before and during this revolution): “Absolutism has to be overthrown by the proletariat.” But “before and in order that absolutism can be toppled, the future bourgeois Russia – with its modern division of classes – has to be produced and to be formed.” “The big industry with all its consequences [...], the modern life in the large city and the modern proletariat, has become the dominant [...] form of production in Russia. The result is the peculiar, contradictory historical situation, that the revolution – a bourgeois one concerning its tasks – is executed first of all by a modern, class-conscious proletariat and within an international milieu that is marked by the decay of bourgeois democracy.” So, “the struggle of the proletariat is directed with equal power against absolutism and against capitalist exploitation.” Luxemburg, Rosa (1906): *Massenstreik, Partei und Gewerkschaften*. Gesammelte Werke, Bd. 2, Berlin (Dietz) 1972, S. 113 und 147. [Mass-strike, party and trade-unions. Collected Writings, vol. 2, p. 113 and 147.]

[7] Luxemburg, R. (1904): “Organisationsfragen der russischen Sozialdemokratie.” (Published in (the Menshevik) *Iskra* and in *Die Neue Zeit* (Stuttgart), 1903/04, vol. 22.2, p. 484-492 and 529-535.) Gesammelte Werke, Bd. 1.2, Berlin (Dietz) 1970, p.422-444. [“Organizational questions of the Russian Social Democracy.”]

[8] Trotsky, Leon (1904): *Unsere politischen Aufgaben*. [Nashi politicheskiia zadachi.] Genf. Dt. in Trotzki (1970): *Schriften zur revolutionären Organisation*. Reinbek (Rowohlt), S. 7-134; Zitat S. 117. (Our Political Tasks, I. c., p. 117.)

[9] Luxemburg ([1918] 1922): “Zur russischen Revolution.” Gesammelte Werke, Bd. 4, Berlin (Dietz) 1970, S. 345. (On the Russian Revolution. Collected Writings, vol. 4, p. 345.)

[10] Trotzki (1920): *Terrorismus und Kommunismus*. (Anti-Kautsky.) [Terrorism and Communism.] In: *Die Grundfragen der Revolution*. [Fundamental Problems of Revolution.] Hamburg (Verlag der Kommunistischen Internationale) 1923. Bes. das Kapitel “Die Pariser Kommune und Sowjetrussland“, S. 76-101. (Esp. the chapter on The Commune of Paris and Soviet Russia.)

[11] Deutscher, I. (1959): *The Prophet Unarmed*. Trotsky: 1921-1929. London (Oxford University Press), p. 127 and 130.