



**Rosa Luxemburg and
German Social Democracy**

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The real place of Rosa Luxemburg has still to be located precisely in the history of the revolutionary movement. The disintegration of the Stalinist monolith has meant that, while many have acknowledged her merits, they have hastened to add that “she belongs to the pre-1914 epoch”. [1] Those writers who pigeon-hole her in this fashion create an impediment for themselves by approaching the history of the workers movement with essentially subjective criteria. In this way the merits of Rosa become – depending on the whim of the author in question – her uncompromising defence of Marxism against the revisionism of Eduard Bernstein, her deep

attachment to the principles of mass action and spontaneity, or even her defence of workers democracy against Bolshevik “excesses”.

The difficulty disappears as soon as we approach the history of the workers movement with objective criteria and apply the golden rule of historical materialism to Marxism itself: in the final analysis it is material existence which determines consciousness and not the reverse. We must start from the changing social reality in order to interpret the modifications which have taken place in the thought of the international workers movement, including successive contributions which have enriched or impoverished Marxism itself. With this method, Rosa’s part in the evolution of the workers movement before 1914 (if not before 1919), instead of appearing atomised and fragmented, retains its unity. Only through such a method rather than the empirical approaches of narrative history and specialised research is the crucial importance of Rosa’s theoretical and practical activity fully revealed.

“The Tried and Tested Tactic” in Crisis

For thirty years the tactics of German Social Democracy, “*die alte bewährte Taktik*” (“the tried and tested tactic”), had completely dominated the international proletarian movement. In fact, apart from the splendid isolation of the Paris Commune and the experiences of certain, mainly anarchist, sections of the international workers movement, the history of the class struggle had borne the social democratic

stamp for half a century. Its influence was so preponderant that even those like Lenin and the Bolsheviks, who had broken in practice with this tradition at a national level, continued to regard the German model religiously as a model which was universally applicable.

“The tried and tested tactic” had a first class pedigree. During the last fifteen years of his life, despite significant vacillations [2], Frederick Engels had become its champion even to the extent of making it a veritable deed in his “political testament”: the *Introduction* that he wrote in 1895 to the new German edition of Karl Marx’s **The Class Struggles in France 1848-50**. The most famous extracts from this *Introduction* were cited innumerable times in every European language between 1895 and 1914. And it was this path which social democracy followed from 1918 to 1929, when the world economic crisis and the crisis of social democracy itself combined to put an end to this sterile exercise:

Everywhere the German example of utilising the suffrage, of winning all the posts accessible to us, has been imitated. Everywhere the spontaneous unleashing of the attack has retreated into the background ... The two million voters whom it sends to the ballot box, together with the young men and women who stand behind ... them as non-voters, form the most numerous, most compact mass, the decisive “shock force” of the international proletarian army. This mass already supplies over a fourth of the recorded votes ... Its growth proceeds as spontaneously, as steadily, as irresistibly, and at the same time as tranquilly as a natural process. All government interventions have proved powerless against it. We can count even today on two and a quarter million voters. If it continues in this fashion, by the end of the century we shall conquer the greater part of the middle section of society,

petty bourgeois and small peasants, and grow into the decisive power in the land, before which all other powers will have to bow, whether they like it or not. *To keep this growth going without interruption until of itself it gets beyond the control of the ruling governmental system, not to fritter away this daily increasing shock force in advance guard fighting, but to keep it intact until the decisive day, that is our main task.* (Engels: **Selected Writings**, edited by W.O. Henderson, pp 294-296. Our emphasis.)

Of course, we now know that the German Social Democratic leaders had scandalously censored Engels' text and had twisted its meaning, removing everything that remained fundamentally revolutionary in the words of this old fighter and lifelong companion of Marx. [3] But all that is by the way. The above quotation is authentic. It completely justifies "the tried and tested tactic": recruit as many members as possible, educate as many workers as possible, gain as many votes as possible in elections, and put new social legislation on the statute book (above all the reduction of the working week) – everything else will follow automatically: "All other powers will have (sic) to bow before us"; our growth is "irresistible"; we must "keep our shock force intact until the decisive day" (sic) ...

Even more convincing than the blessing of the venerable doyen of international socialism was the verdict of the facts. The facts gave credence to Bebel, Vandervelde, Victor Adler and the other pragmatists who were content to plod this path, thereafter elevated to the status of holy writ. At each election the votes grew. If sometimes there was an unexpected reversal (the "Hottentot elections" in Germany in 1907) it was followed by a particularly brilliant riposte:

the Reichstag elections in 1912, when the German Social Democracy won a third of the votes. The workers' organisations were continually gathering strength, extending into every sphere of social life and becoming bastions of what was truly a "counter society" stimulating a sustained development of class consciousness. There were wage rises, there was increasing legislation to protect the workers, and poverty was declining (even if it had not disappeared entirely). The tide seemed so irresistible that not only the faithful but even their adversaries were heady with it.

But, as always, consciousness lagged behind reality. All this "irresistible tide" amounted to was a reflection of the international capitalist boom, a secular reduction in the "industrial reserve army" in Europe, notably through emigration, and the increasing super-exploitation of the colonial and semi-colonial countries by imperialism. By the beginning of the 20th century the resources that had fueled this temporary easing of socio-economic contradictions in the West were beginning to run out. Thenceforth the aggravation and not the easing of social contradictions was on the agenda. Waiting to take the stage was not an epoch of peaceful progress but an epoch of imperialist wars, national liberation struggles and civil war. The long period of amelioration would be followed by twenty years when real wages stagnated or even fell. The epoch of evolution was at an end; the epoch of revolutions was about to begin.

In this new epoch "the tried and tested tactic" lost all justification; from an organisational principle it was to be transformed into a death trap for the European working class. The vast majority of contemporaries did not grasp this before [4] August 1914. Even Lenin had not understood it for the countries which lay to the west of the Tsarist Empire; Trotsky was hesitant. Rosa's merit was that she was the first

to grasp clearly and systematically the necessity for a fundamental change in the strategy and tactics of the workers movement in the West, confronted by a changed objective situation: the dawning of the imperialist epoch. [4]

The roots of Rosa's fight against the "tried and tested tactic"

Of course, the new objective situation had been partially grasped by the most far-sighted Marxists at the end of the 19th century. The phenomenon of the extension of colonial empires and the beginnings of imperialism, insofar as it was the expression of the political expansion of big capital, had been analysed. Hilferding had erected that remarkable monument Finance Capital. He recorded the appearance of cartels, trusts and monopolies (used by the revisionists to claim that capitalism would become more and more organised and thus its contradictions less acute; there really is nothing new under the sun). After the International's Stuttgart Conference the suspicions of Lenin, the Polish, Dutch, Belgian and Italian left regarding Kautsky's concessions to the revisionists increased, especially on the question of the fight against imperialist war. Electoral opportunism and "tactical" blocs with the liberal bourgeoisie of this or that region or national group (such as the Baden group in Germany, the majority of the Belgian Workers Party, the followers of Jaurés in

France, etc.) came under heavy fire. However, all this criticism remained partial and fragmented and, above all, “the tried and tested tactic” was not scrapped in favour of a new system of strategy and tactics. On the contrary, it was treated with more reverence than ever before.

From 1900 to 1914 Rosa was the only socialist west of Russia to strike out in a new direction. This exceptional achievement was not just the result of her undeniable genius, her clarity of thought, and her unflinching devotion to the cause of socialism and the international working class. It can be explained above all by the historical and geographical, that is to say social, conditions in which her theory and practice were nurtured and developed.

Her unique position as a leader of two social democratic parties (the German and Polish parties) placed her at a vantage point for understanding the two contradictory tendencies in international social democracy. On the one hand there was the dangerous slide into bureaucratic routinism which was becoming ever more pronounced in Germany, and on the other hand there was the rise of new forms and methods of struggle in the Tsarist Empire. She was therefore able to perform for the tactics of the workers movement the same audacious operation that Trotsky had performed for revolutionary perspectives. No longer did the most “advanced” countries necessarily show the “backward” ones the image of their own future. On the contrary, the workers of the “backward” countries (Russia and Poland) were showing the Western countries the urgent tactical modifications that had to be adopted.

Naturally, this too had been foreseen by certain Marxists. As early as 1896, Parvus had published a long study in the

Neue Zeit in which he envisaged the use of “a mass political strike” as a weapon against the threat of a coup to suppress universal suffrage. This study was itself inspired by a resolution Kautsky had submitted to the 10th Session of the Socialist Congress in Zurich (1893) on the appropriate response to threats to universal suffrage. [5] Engels had broached the same question in the past, but all these had been isolated forays which led to no strategic or tactical changes.

Rosa was also helped by an in-depth study of the two political crises which had shaken Western Europe towards the end of the century: the Dreyfus affair in France, and the General Strike for universal suffrage in Belgium (1902). From this twofold experience she developed a deep hatred of parliamentary cretinism. Furthermore, she developed a growing conviction that “the tried and tested tactic” would fail at “the decisive hour” if the masses were not trained well in advance in the politics of extra-parliamentary action as well as routine electoralism and purely economic strikes. However, it was above all the experience of the Russian revolution of 1905 that enabled Rosa to integrate her scattered criticisms into a systematic critique of “the tried and tested tactic”. With hindsight we can say that it was undoubtedly 1905 which marked the end of the essentially progressive role of international social democracy and ushered in the prolonged phase of vacillation in which formerly progressive traits were increasingly combined with reactionary influences which steadily grew in strength until they brought the party to the disaster of August 1914.

To grasp the importance of the Russian revolution of 1905 we must bear in mind that it was the first mass revolutionary upheaval which Europe had witnessed since the days of the Paris Commune: that is, for 34 years! It was therefore perfectly natural that such a passionate

revolutionary as Rosa should carefully study every detail of the explosion and all its particular characteristics in order to draw out the central lessons of 1905 for the coming upheavals in Europe. In this she merely followed in the footsteps of Marx and Engels, who performed exactly the same examination for the upheavals of 1848 and the Paris Commune.

One aspect of the 1905 revolution in particular was decisive in precipitating the development of a new strategy and new tactics for international social democracy, counterposed to the “tried and tested tactic” of the SPD. For decades the debate between the anarchists and syndicalists on the one hand and the social democrats on the other had been caught in a false polarisation which counterposed the supporters of minority direct action to those who supported mass, organised action, which meant in practice “peaceful”, “legalistic” work (in the electoral arena or the trade unions). However, the revolution of 1905 produced a combination of events which neither side had foreseen. For 1905 saw direct action by the masses, yet these masses, far from wallowing happily in a pristine state of spontaneous and unorganised innocence, organised themselves precisely through their experience of mass action in order to prepare themselves for even more audacious actions in the future.

Thus, even though revolutionary syndicalism had for many years counterposed the “myth” of the general strike to social democratic electoralism, and although it was at that very moment that a general strike was victorious in Europe for the first time, both Lenin and Rosa grasped the fact that had not been understood in the West: that 1905 sounded the death-knell of revolutionary syndicalism in Russia! They should have added, of course – and Lenin understood this only after 1914 – that the eclipse of revolutionary syndicalism in Russia could only be explained by the fact

that, far from opposing the mass strike or trying to curb it in any way, the Russian and Polish Social Democrats (or at least their most radical wings) had become enthusiastic organisers and propagandists for the mass strike and had thus definitively overcome the old dichotomy: “gradual action – revolutionary action”. [6]

Rosa was dazzled by the experience of the 1905 revolution, an experience which had struck a chord in the hearts of workers in several countries to the west of the Tsarist Empire – beginning with Austria, where it provoked a general strike that won universal suffrage. The last 14 years of Rosa’s life thus became a sustained effort to teach this one fundamental lesson to the German proletariat: it is necessary to abandon gradualism, it is necessary to prepare for mass revolutionary struggles which are once again on the agenda. The outbreak of the First World War, of the Russian Revolution of 1917, and of the German Revolution of 1918 all confirmed the accuracy of the estimation she had made in 1905.

On the first of February 1905 she wrote:

But for international social democracy, too, the uprising of the Russian proletariat constitutes something profoundly new which we must feel with every fibre of our being. All of us, whatever pretensions we have to a mastery of dialectics, remain incorrigible metaphysicians, obsessed by the immanence of everything within our everyday experience... It is only in the volcanic explosion of the revolution that we perceive what swift and earth-shattering results the young mole has achieved and just how happily it is undermining the very ground under the feet of European bourgeois society. Gauging the political maturity and revolutionary energy of the working class through electoral statistics and the membership of local branches is like trying to measure Mont Blanc with a ruler!

She continued on the first of May:

This is the main point to grasp: we must understand and assimilate the fact that the actuality of a revolution in the Tsarist Empire will provoke a colossal acceleration in the tempo of the international class struggle so that even in the heartlands of “old Europe” we will face in the not too distant future revolutionary situations and entirely new tactical problems.

Finally, in a confrontation with reformist syndicalists like Robert Schmidt at the Jena Congress on 22 September 1905, she cried out indignantly:

So far you have sat here and heard many speeches delivered on the political mass strike. Doesn't it make you feel like putting your head in your hands and asking yourself: are we really living in the year of the glorious Russian revolution or is it still decades away? Every day you can read the accounts of the revolution in the papers, every day you can read the dispatches, and yet you obviously have neither eyes to see nor ears to hear ... Doesn't Robert Schmidt see that the moment predicted by our great teachers Marx and Engels has actually arrived? The moment when evolution becomes revolution! We have the Russian revolution right in front of our eyes. We would be fools if we didn't learn anything from it. [7]

Looking back we know that she was right. Just as the victory of the Russian revolution in 1917 would have been infinitely more difficult without the experience of 1905 and the tremendous revolutionary apprenticeship that it represented for tens of thousands of Russian worker cadres, so the victory of the German Revolution of 1918-9 would have been far easier had the German workers experienced pre-revolutionary or revolutionary mass political struggles

before 1914. You can't learn to swim without getting your feet wet, and the masses cannot attain revolutionary consciousness without the experience of revolutionary actions. Even if it was impossible to imitate the 1905 revolution in Germany between 1905 and 1914, it was at least perfectly possible to transform completely the daily routine of social democracy, to reorientate it towards an ever more revolutionary mode of intervention and cadre formation, and thus to prepare the masses for the inevitable confrontation with the bourgeoisie and its state apparatus. By refusing to strike out on a new course and by clinging to increasingly unreal formulas about the "inevitable" victory of socialism, the "inevitable" retreat of the bourgeoisie and its state in the face of "the calm and tranquil strength" of the workers, the leaders of the SPD during these decisive years sowed the dragons' teeth which sprang up as armed warriors in 1914, 1919, and 1933 as the German workers reaped the bitter harvests of defeat.

The debate on the mass strike

It is in this context that we must examine the debate on the mass strike which unfolded in the SPD after 1905. The main stages of the debate were marked by: the Jena Conference of 1905 (in a certain sense the most "gauchiste" conference before 1914, obviously

due to the pressure of the Russian revolution); the Mannheim Conference of 1906; the publication in that same year of two pamphlets, one by Kautsky and one by Rosa, both addressed to the problem of the “mass strike”, the 1910 debate between Rosa and Kautsky; and finally the debate between Kautsky and Pannekoek. [8]

We can rehearse the essential points of the debate, even if rather schematically, as follows. Having fought the idea of a general strike as a “general stupidity” (“*Generalstreik ist Generalunsinn*”) for decades under the pretext that one must first organise the vast majority of workers before such a strike could be successful, the SPD leaders were shaken by the Belgian General Strike of 1902-3, but approached any revision of their “quietist” conceptions only in a very hesitant way. [9] In 1905, at the Jena Conference, a clash broke out between the union leaders and the leaders of the SPD during which the union leaders went so far as to suggest that the supporters of the general strike should depart for Russia or Poland post haste to put their ideas into practice. [10] With reluctance, but not without vigour, Bebel entered the arena and attacked the union leaders, admitting the possibility of a mass political strike “in principle”. However, a compromise was hammered out between the conferences of Jena and Mannheim. At Mannheim (1906) peace was restored in the central apparatus. Thereafter only the union chiefs were to be considered “competent” to “proclaim” strike action, including a mass political strike, after they had weighed up all the problems of “organisation”, the funds available, the “balance of forces”, etc. After the untoward intervention of an actual revolution in Russia, the SPD leaders heaved a sigh of relief and returned to the

familiar and well-trodden paths of “the tried and tested tactic”.

Throughout all this Rosa was, of course, furiously champing at the bit. She was just waiting for the most propitious moment to strike a decisive blow for her new strategy and tactics. The moment dawned with the elections to the Prussian Diet in 1910, when agitation for universal suffrage was launched. The masses were demanding action and Rosa organised a dozen mass meetings aided by thousands of workers and militants. A police ban on the meetings led to skirmishes and finally a central demonstration of 200,000 was organised in Treptow Park, Berlin. But the SPD leadership hated these “disturbances” like the plague, and concentrated on preparing the best possible electoral intervention in the 1912 elections. Consequently the agitation was stifled at birth and this time it was Kautsky himself, the “guardian of orthodoxy”, who took up the cudgels and led the theoretical and political struggle of the apparatus against the left. He produced countless pedantic articles and pamphlets which reveal, above all else, a complete failure to grasp the dynamic of the mass movement. [11]

At first sight a reversal of alliances had occurred. At the turn of the century, Rosa and Kautsky (the left and the centre) had blocked with the apparatus of the party around Bebel and Singer against the revisionist minority around Bernstein. In 1906, at the Mannheim Conference, the trade union apparatus went over to the revisionist camp and the Bebel-Kautsky-Rosa alliance seemed stronger than ever. So how then should we account for the sudden reversal in this system of alliances, which took place within the space of four years (1906-10)? In fact, the social and political realities of the problem differed decisively from the appearances. Bebel and the party apparatus were just as much enamoured of

“the tried and tested tactic” in 1900 as in 1910. They were fundamentally conservative, that is to say supporters of the status quo in the heart of the workers movement itself (without having lost for all that their socialist convictions and even passions, but having relegated these to the province of a distant future). Bernstein and the revisionists threatened to upset the delicate equilibrium between “the tried and tested tactic” (that is, the daily reformist practice), socialist propaganda, the hopes and faith of the masses in socialism, the unity of the party, and the unity between the masses and the party. For that reason Bebel and the apparatus opposed him; for essentially conservative ends so as not to upset the apple-cart.

However, the revolution of 1905 and the impact of imperialism on the relations between the classes in Germany itself aggravated the tensions in the heart of the workers movement. When the possibility of a split emerged after the Jena Conference, Bebel, Ebert and Scheidemann showed that they preferred the unity of the apparatus to unity with radicalising workers – that is how they interpreted “the primacy of organisation”. From that moment on, the whole of the party apparatus broke with the left, because it was now the left who was demanding that “the tried and tested tactic” be jettisoned, not only in theory but also – horror of horrors – in practice. The die was cast.

The only question which remained open for a time was Kautsky’s position. Would he side with the party apparatus against the left, or with the left against the apparatus? After the 1905 revolution he momentarily leaned to the left, yet a significant incident decided his fate. In 1908 Kautsky wrote his pamphlet **The Road to Power**. In it he examined precisely the question that had been left unanswered since Engels’ famous preface of 1895. How does one pass from winning the majority of the working masses to socialism (by

means of the “tried and tested tactic”) to the conquest of political power itself? His formulas were moderate and did not imply any systematic revolutionary agitation. The question of the abolition of the monarchy was not posed (instead he modestly referred to “the democratisation of the Empire and its component states”). But even so there were too many “dangerous phrases” in this pamphlet for the small-minded, conservative and bureaucratised “*Parteivorstand*”. The possibility of “revolution” was mentioned, it was even mooted that, “Nobody should be so naive as to imagine that we will pass imperceptibly and peacefully from a militarist state ... to democracy”. This was “dangerous phrase-mongering”. It might even “provoke a law-suit”. And so the *Parteivorstand* decided to turn the pamphlet back into pulp. [12]

A tragi-comedy ensued which decided the fate of Kautsky as a revolutionary and a theoretician. He appealed to the Control Commission of the party, which found in his favour. But Bebel remained unmoved. Kautsky then agreed to submit to party censorship and to emasculate the text himself. He censored anything that might prove controversial and thus rendered the text completely anodyne, emerging from the whole affair as a completely spineless individual with no strength of character. Even in this episode one can see the seeds of his future break with Rosa, his centrism, his role as an apparatchik in the 1910-12 debate, his base capitulation in 1914, etc.

It is no accident that the acid test for Kautsky, as for all centrists, was the question of the struggle for power and the reintegration of revolution into a strategy entirely founded upon a daily reformist routine. Effectively, this had been the decisive question for international social democracy since 1905.

An analysis of the first draft of **The Road to Power** reveals that elements of centrism were present even before the bureaucratic axe fell. For although Kautsky perceptively analysed those factors leading to increasing class contradictions (imperialism, militarism, reduced economic expansion, etc), his fundamental philosophy was still that of “the tried and tested tactic”: industrialisation and the concentration of capital are working for us, our rise is irresistible unless something unforeseen occurs ... Such was Kautsky’s reasoning, and the idea of abandoning passive fatalism was only entertained for those instances when “our enemies commit a foolish mistake” – a coup d’état or a world war. After all, matters had not progressed one inch since 1896, when Parvus first formulated the problem.

Revolutionary strikes and mass explosions were of no importance in Kautsky’s **Road to Power**. Even the Russian revolution was only invoked to show that it opened an era of revolutions in the East (which was correct), and that because of inter-imperialist conflicts the revolutionary period in the East would have profound effects on conditions in the West (which was also correct) and would undoubtedly exacerbate the tensions and increase the instability of bourgeois society. But no connections were made between the objective effects of the Russian upheaval in creating instability and the effects of the revolution on the activity of the proletarian masses of Western Europe. Political initiative, the subjective factor, the active element – these go completely by the board. “Await your enemy’s mistake, prepare for zero hour by purely organisational means, be careful to leave the initiative to the enemy” – that is the sum total of the centrist wisdom of Kautsky in a nutshell! Later this was to be rendered still more profound by the Austro-Marxists – whose catastrophic failure did not burst upon the world until 1934!

Rosa's superiority is clearly revealed in every aspect of this crucial debate. To the dull rote of statistics with which Kautsky justified his thesis that "the revolution can never break out prematurely", Rosa counterposed a profound understanding of the immaturity of conditions which each and every proletarian revolution will know in its birth-pangs:

... these "premature" advances of the proletariat constitute in themselves a very important factor, which will create the political conditions for the final victory, because the proletariat cannot attain the degree of political maturity necessary to accomplish the final overthrow unless it is tempered in the flames of long and stubborn struggles. [13]

Rosa had written this as early as 1900, and it was here that she began to formulate the first elements of a theory of the subjective conditions necessary for a revolutionary victory, while Kautsky was still obsessed by an examination of purely objective conditions, to the extent of denying the very existence of the problems raised by Rosa! With her deep sympathy for the life and aspirations of the masses, her sensitivity to the moods of the masses and the dynamics of mass action, Rosa was able to raise, as early as the debate of 1910, the crucial problem of proletarian strategy in the 20th century: the futility of expecting an uninterrupted rise in the combativity of the masses and the fact that if they were frustrated by a lack of results and a lack of leadership they would relapse into passivity. [14]

When Kautsky asserted that the success of a general strike "capable of stopping all the factories" depended on the

preliminary organisation of all the workers, he pushed the “primacy of organisation” to an absurd point. History has shown that in this debate he was wrong and Rosa was right. We have known numerous general strikes that have succeeded in paralysing the entire economic and social fabric of a modern nation, despite the fact that only a minority of workers were organised. May '68 is only the latest confirmation of an old experience.

If Rosa is guilty of a “theory of spontaneity” (something far from proven) it certainly cannot be gauged from her judgements on the inevitability of mass, spontaneous initiatives during revolutionary upheavals (she was 100 per cent right on this point), neither in some illusion that these spontaneous initiatives would be sufficient for revolutionary victory, nor even that such initiatives in and of themselves would produce the organisation which would lead the revolution to victory. She was never guilty of the infantile misconceptions so dear to today’s spontaneists.

What gave the “mass political strike” such an exceptional place in Rosa’s schema was that she saw in it the essential means to educate and prepare the masses for the coming revolutionary conflicts (better still: to educate them and create the conditions which would enable them to perfect their education through self-activity). Although she had not elaborated a strategy of transitional demands, she had drawn from the sum of past experiences the following conclusions: that it was necessary to break with the daily practice of electoral struggles, economic strikes and abstract propaganda “for socialism”. For her the mass political strike was the essential means to break out of that very ghetto.

Confrontation with the state apparatus, raising the political consciousness of the masses, revolutionary apprenticeship... all this was seen from a clearly revolutionary perspective which foresaw revolutionary crises

in a relatively short period of time. If it was Lenin who founded Bolshevism on the conviction of the actuality of the Russian revolution, if it was he who extended this notion to the rest of Europe only after 4 August 1914, then it was Rosa who merits the distinction of first conceiving a socialist strategy based on the same imminence of revolution in the West itself, directly after the first Russian revolution of 1905.

When Kautsky argued against Rosa that “spontaneous movements of the organised masses are always unpredictable” and for this reason dangerous for a “revolutionary party”, he revealed the mentality of a petty jack-in-office who imagines that a “revolution” will run according to a carefully worked-out schedule. Rosa was a thousand times right to stress in opposition to this view that a revolutionary party, like Russian and Polish Social Democracy in 1905, distinguished itself precisely by its ability to understand and grasp what was progressive in this unavoidable and healthy mass spontaneity in order to harness its energy on the revolutionary goals that it had formulated and embodied in its organisation. [15] It took all the dogged conservatism of the Stalinist bureaucracy to dredge up again against Rosa the unfounded accusation that her analysis of the revolutionary processes in 1905 placed “too much emphasis” on the spontaneity of the masses and “not enough on the role of the party”. [16]

The fact that she had a realistic – and unfortunately prophetic – vision of the role that the bureaucracy in the workers movement could play in such a revolutionary crisis comes out in her speech to the Jena Conference in September 1905:

Previous revolutions, and especially those of 1848, have shown that in the course of revolutionary situations it is not the

masses who must be curbed, but the parliamentary tribunes, to stop them betraying the masses. [17]

After the bitter experiences of 1906-10 she was even more precise when she returned to the same subject in 1910:

If the revolutionary situation comes to full bloom, if the waves of struggles are very advanced, then the leaders of the party will find no effective brake and the masses will simply push aside those leaders who stand in the path of the storm. This could happen one day in Germany. But I do not believe that in the interests of social democracy it is necessary or desirable to move in this direction. [18]

The unity of the work of Rosa Luxemburg

In the context of Rosa's "grand design" – to lead Social Democracy to abandon "the tried and tested tactic" and to prepare for the revolutionary struggles which she judged imminent – the totality of her activity acquires an undeniable unity.

Her analysis of imperialism does not only correspond to autonomous theoretical preoccupations, although these preoccupations were real. [19] She was aiming to uncover, in all its aspects, one of the main causes of the worsening contradictions in the capitalist world and in German society in particular. Similarly, internationalism was not simply thought of as a more or less platonic theme for propaganda, but as a function of two requirements: the increasing internationalisation of strikes, and the preparation of the working class for the struggle against the coming imperialist war. The internationalist campaign which Rosa waged for twenty years in international social democracy was guided by a revolutionary perspective and a strategic alternative,

like her campaign for the “mass political strike” and her profound analysis of imperialism.

The same is true for her anti-militarist and anti-monarchist campaigns. Contrary to a widely-held belief, sometimes even repeated by sympathetic commentators [20], Rosa’s anti-militarist campaign was not only a function of her “hatred” (or her “fear” of the war) but was the result of a precise understanding that the bourgeois state had to be smashed for a socialist revolution to be victorious. As early as 1899 she wrote in the **Leipziger Volkszeitung**:

The power and domination of the bourgeois State as well as the bourgeois class is concentrated in militarism. Likewise social democracy is the only political party which fights militarism for principled reasons. So this principled struggle against militarism belongs to the very nature of social democracy. To abandon the fight against the militarist system would simply lead in practice to the abandonment of the struggle against the existing social order. [21]

In **Reform or Revolution** one year later, in her comments on compulsory military service, she succinctly repeats that, if this prepares the material basis for the arming of the people, it does it “under the guise of modern militarism, which expresses in a most striking manner the domination of the people by the militarist State, the class nature of the State”. These crystal clear formulas demonstrate the immense gulf that separated her, not only from the rambling of Bernstein, but also from the lawyer’s phrases of Kautsky on the “democratisation [sic!] of the Empire”.

We can therefore immediately understand the terrible anger that must have gripped Rosa when she saw those very reformists who had blamed her for “risking the workers’

blood” with her “adventurist tactics” [22] themselves spill the blood of the workers after August 1914 on a scale a thousand times greater, not for their own cause but for that of their exploiters. This indignation was what inspired her bitter verdicts on the SPD: “social democracy is nothing but a stinking corpse”; “the German Social Democrats are the greatest and most infamous criminals that have ever lived on earth”. [23]

So what, then, is the verdict of history on Rosa Luxemburg? She was to all intents and purposes wrong in her mutual appreciation of the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in Russia. She had simultaneously fought against Lenin’s “ultra-centralism” whilst tolerating Leo Jogisches’ iron regime in her own underground Polish Workers Party. [24] She was inclined to set too much store by the vanguard’s assimilation of socialist doctrine and thus underestimated the need to forge working class cadres really capable of guiding those broad masses who would politicise and enter the historic stage only on the day of the revolution. For the same reason she devoted no resources to building a tendency or an organised left fraction within the SPD after 1907 (the formation of a new party was of course impossible until the treachery of the SPD leadership had been irremediably demonstrated to the masses by manifest betrayals of an historic scope). The young Spartakusbund and later the KPD were to pay a terrible price for this failure to use the intervening decade to build a real leadership team; they were forced to undertake this task in the midst of the revolution.

Yet all these areas were in function of the great struggle which had dominated her life. Rosa was actually in Germany, and as such she developed an increasing scorn and suspicion for the social democratic apparatus of time servers and functionaries whose crimes she perceived far

earlier and far more clearly than did Lenin. Not until 1914 did Lenin adopt Rosa's conclusions on German Social Democracy. Only then did he deduce the fundamental historic lesson of the tragedy – that it was completely insufficient for victory merely to have built a “powerful organisation”. What was needed was an organisation whose programme and whose daily use of it to intervene in the class struggle would ensure that on the day of the revolution the party would be the driving force of the proletariat and not its bureaucratic hangman. And not until 1918 did Rosa in turn reach Lenin's conclusions. It was then that she grasped the need to build an organisation of the revolutionary vanguard and firmly understood that it was not sufficient to have unbounded confidence in the creativity of the masses, or in their spontaneous ability to jettison social democratic bureaucrats who had finally nailed their counter-revolutionary colours to the mast.

All in all, contemporary revolutionary Marxism owes a tremendous debt to Rosa Luxemburg. She was the first Marxist to have defined and begun to resolve the central problems of revolutionary Marxist strategy and tactics which alone can ensure the victory of the proletarian revolution in the imperialist heartlands.

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Notes

1. This is particularly the judgement of J.P. Nettl, who has written the fullest biography of Rosa to date (**Rosa Luxemburg**, London, 1966). Nettl combines a wealth of detail and an often impressive judgement on partial events with a complete lack of comprehension of the general problems of proletarian strategy,

the mass movement and revolutionary perspectives: precisely the problems that preoccupied Rosa throughout her life.

2. Therefore, when the danger of war was posed for the first time in the 1890s, Engels asserted that, in the event of a war, social democracy would be forced to take power and expressed the fear that this could end disastrously. In the same letter to Bebel he expressed his conviction that, “we would be in power by the end of the century” (letter to Bebel, 24 October 1891). In a previous letter (dated 1 May 1891) he attacked Bebel’s plan to censor the publication of the **Critique of the Gotha Programme** and denounced the attack on the freedom of criticism and discussion within the party (August Bebel, **Briefwechsel mit Friedrich Engels**, Mouton & Co., 1965, pp.417, 465.)

3. Engels wrote to Kautsky on 1 April 1895: “I see an extract from my *Introduction* has appeared in **Vorwärts** today, reprinted without my knowledge and laid out in such a manner that I appear as nothing more than a peaceable lover of legality at all costs. I therefore desire all the more that an uncut version of the *Introduction* be published in the **Neue Zeit** so that this shameful Impression is wiped out.”

Using the pretext of threats of legal sanctions, Bebel and Kautsky refused to comply. Engels let himself be coaxed and did not insist on a complete reproduction of the *Introduction*. This only happened after 1918 through the good offices of another International – the Comintern.

4. Trotsky had almost echoed Rosa’s opinion in **Results and Prospects** (1906), emphasising the increasingly conservative character of social democracy. However, because of the conciliatory position he adopted on the faction fight in the RSDLP, he came closer to Kautsky in 1908 and supported him against Rosa in the debate on the “mass political strike”. Lenin took a very cautious attitude on the conflict between Rosa and Kautsky in 1910, attempting to stop a bloc developing between Kautsky and the Mensheviks. In his article *Two Worlds* he asserted that the differences between the Marxists (amongst whom he numbered not only Rosa and Kautsky, but also Bebel) were only of a tactical nature and, moreover, in the final analysis

were minor disagreements. He praised the “caution” of Bebel and justified his thesis according to which it was preferable to leave the enemy the initiative in starting the war. (**Werke**, Vol. XVI, pp 311-16, Berlin, Dietz-Verlag)

5. The article was entitled *Staatsstreich und politischer Massenstreik*, and was first published in **Neue Zeit**. It has been reproduced in the anthology **Die Massenstreikdebatte**, published by the Europäische Verlagsanstalt (Frankfurt, 1970, pp.46-95).

6. As early as **Reform or Revolution**, Rosa had written: “It fell to Bernstein to consider it possible that the farmyard of the bourgeois parliament would be called upon to bring about the most incredible social transformation in history – the passage from capitalist to socialist society.”

Rosa’s critique of parliamentarianism and her analysis of the decline of the bourgeois parliament written in 1900 retains a freshness and a relevance which no other Marxist writing in Western Europe before 1914 possesses. In the same vein Rosa explained the increasing strength of revolutionary syndicalism in France as a result of the illusions of the French working class in “Jaurésist” parliamentarianism. (Cf. her article published in the **Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung** of 5/6 December 1905 – Rosa Luxemburg, **Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften**, Vol.1, p.196.)

7. These quotations are from an article published in the **Neue Zeit** (*Nach dem ersten Akt*), in the **Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung** (*Im Feuerschmelne der Revolution*) and from her speech at the Jena Congress (see Rosa Luxemburg, **Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften**, Vol.II, Dietz Verlag, Berlin 1955, pp.220/1, 234/5, and 244).

8. A good summary of this debate is given by Antonia Grunenberg in her *Introduction* to **Die Massenstreikdebatte** (pp.5-44).

9. For example, in the article *The Lessons of the Miners’ Strike* (*Die Lehren des Bergerbeiterstreik*) which appeared in the **Neue Zeit** in 1903.

10. Rosa Luxemburg, *Speech at the Jena Congress*, 21 September 1905 (**Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften**, Vol.II, pp.240-1).

11. See in particular his article *What Next* (**Neue Zeit**, 1910) with its distinctions between “pre-emptive defensive strikes” and “strikes of aggression” (a distinction which originates from the book by Henriette Roland-Horst on the mass strike), “economic” and “political” strikes, “strategy of attrition” versus “strategy of overthrow”, etc. (**Die Massenstreikdebatte**, pp.96-121).

12. See the edition of **The Road to Power** published by Editions Anthropos (Paris, 1969), with an introduction and an appendix of correspondence which throw some light on this sad affair.

13. Rosa Luxemburg, **Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften**, Vol.II, p.136.

14. **Ibid.**, pp.325/6, 330. These are extracts from an article published in **Dortmunder Arbeiterzeitung** entitled *Was Weiter?*.

15. It is simply a slander, spread by the Stalinists and “innocently” repeated by today’s spontaneists, that Rosa attributed “all the merits” of the 1905 revolution to the “unorganised masses” without mentioning the role of the RSDLP. Here, from a wealth of others, is just one quotation which proves quite the opposite: “And even if, in the first moments, the leadership of the uprising fell into the hands of chance leaders, even if the uprising was apparently bedeviled by all sorts of illusions and traditions, the uprising is nothing but the result of the enormous amount of political education spread deep inside the Russian working class by the underground agitation of the men and women of Russian Social Democracy... In Russia, as in the rest of the world, the cause of liberty and social progress is in the hands of the conscious proletariat.” (8 February 1905 in **Die Gleichheit - Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften**, Vol.1, p.216).

16. Cf. the biography of Rosa by Fred Oelssner, Dietz Verlag, Berlin 1951 – especially pp.50-53.

17. **Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften**, Vol.1, p.245.

18. *Theorie und Praxis* (**Neue Zeit** 1910) reproduced in **Die Massenstreikdebatte**, p.231.

19. Rosa herself remarked that while writing her **Introduction to Political Economy** she stumbled on a theoretical difficulty when she wanted to demonstrate the impediments to the realisation of surplus-value. Hence her project to write **The Accumulation of Capital**.

20. Notably Antonia Grunenberg in her introduction to **Die Massenstreikdebatte** (p.43), where she maintains that Pannekoek was diametrically opposed to both Rosa and Kautsky in formulating strategic conceptions on the conquest of power, posing the question of the struggle against bourgeois state power.

21. Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften, Vol.I, p.47.

22. Ibid., p. 245.

23. Speech on the programme delivered by Rosa to the founding conference of the KPD (**Der Gründungsparteitag der KPD, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1969, p.194.**). In particular her hackles were raised when, after the 1918 Armistice, the SPD leaders tried to use German soldiers against the Russian revolution in the Baltic countries.

24. Very recently Edda Werfel published in Poland the Rosa Luxemburg-Leo Jogisches correspondence, which will undoubtedly furnish important supplementary material for a study of the practical and theoretical attitude of Rosa to the “question of organisation” inside her own Polish party. A partial translation of this correspondence into French and German (by Editions Anthropos and Europäische Verlagsanstalt) is in the pipeline.
