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Excerpt on Rosa Luxemburg from a letter on Trotsky, Oct. 14, 1948

I'll once again review Luxemburg. In 1903 she is against centralist "bureaucratism," but offers no analysis of Menshevism. In 1906-9 she breaks with Kautsky, but organizes no party of her own. Clearly, to Luxemburg the proletariat has remained a unity, despite the fact that the general strike brought about her break with Kautsky. (We'll come back to that later.) ~~In 1912 there is a split in the Polish party, and this completes her break from Bolshevism in opposing the self-determination of nations.~~ The climax of that comes later in the question of the Ukraine. On the eve of the war, she still tries to unite Menshevism with Bolshevism--unity is still the key just when the breakdown of capitalism will soon reveal the breakdown also of the proletarian organizations. In 1917 she calls the Second International a "stinking corpse" and hails Lenin and Trotsky for "storming the heavens," but she keeps her distance from them. Why? It seems to me that just as she did not grasp the significance of Bolshevism--or perhaps because she didn't--she does not recognize the new organization the proletariat has formed. In retrospect, that in part accounts for her failure to break with Kautsky organizationally. For her 1905 meant general strike--economic action--not Soviet--political action; the organization of the proletariat as rulers outside of the realm of the party.

Let me elaborate. She describes Germany 1918 as "chaos, without plan, without consciousness. The revolution was political only, not economic." You need not overthrow Scheidemann "but to undermine him." For Russia 1918 she says: "In place of the representative bodies, created by general, popular elections, Lenin and Trotsky have laid down soviets as the only true representation of the laboring masses." Evidently, to Luxemburg "representative bodies" should represent, not be, the masses. If the masses are to be "represented," then they must submit to elections, and so at specific places and specified times; when the masses wish, in burst of revolution, not to be represented but to be, creating an unheard of organization--well, that does not conform to form--Talk of organized capitalist production organizing us, the revolutionists as well! And finally, in the question of the Ukraine, she says "it had never formed a nation or government"!!

Why is Rosa so consistently wrong? (Incidentally, if Rosa thinks that a no-nation entity could produce a Gogol, she has no conception of the relationship of literature and genius to the masses. Did you know I was a Ukrainian?)

Her failure to grasp the economic content of the revolution stems from her failure "to see" the monopolization of capital and thus falling prey to the glitter of imperialism, and thus her theory of accumulation has her bound and gagged. Every

time she wishes to move as a revolutionist, she must do violence to her theory. She drags the proletariat onto the historic stage in order to destroy capitalism "long before" capitalism has run out of breath in the non-capitalist lands. "Long before" is written on the eve of 1914 when the irreversible breakdown of European society from the law of motion of capitalism and the actions of the proletariat. She continues to demand "spontaneity" from the undifferentiated proletarian mass when the organization of the proletariat shows her where power should lie. (I naturally do not mean that she would have been victorious--how can anyone guarantee that--but she would have left a legacy for the future revolution other than her martyrdom.) Finally, she declares: "The victory of the spartakusbund stands not at the beginning but at the end of the revolution. It is identical with the victory of the millions of masses of the socialist proletariat."

I underlined the expressions, "at the end of the revolution," and "identical," because it seems to signify that so vicious is the stranglehold of capitalist organization that we evidently think that in a socialist society, not Man, but the Party will fully develop. That is why for all the seeming oppositeness of her spontaneity and LT's Plan, they are in actuality similars (is there such a word?) When the objective situation demanded organization, she opposed it--Lenin's Party to her was nothing but a bureaucratic contraption. When the objective situation shows that the German Social Democracy not merely betrayed the proletariat but was attempting to organize it as capitalism's economic arm, i.e., as its lifeless slave, she rejects proletariat's "spontaneously" creating the Shop Stewards Movement, and lets it die because it does not conform to form.

That, not her martyrdom, is, to me, the great historic tragedy of Luxemburgism. If only we could learn lessons of the party and its relation to the mass movement from this stranglehold that capitalist organization had even on this sterling, brilliant, courageous revolutionary "eagle"! It is not only that she built no Bolshevik party, so to speak, ahead of 1914, but that when the proletariat was smashing German society in 1917-1919--and had power enough left over for 1920 and 1923--she did not lead the proletariat to smash the organizations that held it in a very real death grapple.