

“Rosa Luxemburg Belongs to Us!” German Communism and the Luxemburg Legacy

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Introduction

ROSA Luxemburg’s commitment to democratic politics stands as her most pronounced intellectual legacy. Her rhetoric, rarely mundane, becomes especially compelling and powerful when she invokes the creative potential of human beings to order their own affairs, the lifeblood of society pulsing through the actions of ordinary people. Especially her famed writings on the Russian Revolution have served as the intellectual wellsprings for an alternative socialist politics beginning with Paul Levi (her successor as head of the Communist party of Germany) in 1922 and continuing through the entire history of the twentieth-century Left. Written within months of the Bolshevik Revolution and while she still languished in prison, the oft-cited passages offer some of the finest expressions of her democratic sensibilities. In the margins she wrote what would become one of her most famous passages, the central phrase of which—“*Freiheit ist immer Freiheit der Andersdenkenden*”—was unfurled at the Liebknecht-Luxemburg counterdemonstration in January 1988 in the German Democratic Republic and became the clarion call of the opposition in its early phase.

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Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party—however numerous they may be—is not freedom. Freedom is always freedom for those who think differently. Not because of any fanatical sense of “justice,” but because all that is enlivening, beneficial, and clarifying in political freedom depends on this condition, and its efficacy fades when “freedom” becomes a privilege.¹

In the main body of the text she provided a vision of a participatory socialism that echoed the humanism of the early Marx, and a sweeping critique of bureaucratic socialism that many subsequent commentators have lauded for its predictive powers.

... Socialism by its very *nature* cannot be decreed, cannot be introduced through *ukase* . . . The negative [aspects], the demolition, can be ordered, but *not* the positive [aspects] . . . Only experience [is] capable of corrections, of forging new paths. Only unrestricted, effervescent life, which dissipates into thousands of new forms and improvisations, contains *creative power*, and itself corrects all mistaken efforts. The public life of states with limited freedom is therefore so impoverished, so schematic, so barren. By excluding democracy, [these states] shut down the wellsprings of all spiritual wealth and progress . . .

With the suppression of political life in the entire country, life in the soviets also becomes increasingly paralyzed. Without general elections, without unlimited freedom of the press and of assembly, the free conflict of ideas dies out. Life in all of the public institutions becomes a mere semblance of life in which the bureaucracy alone remains the active element. Public life gradually wanes, and a dozen party leaders, possessed of inexhaustible energy and limitless idealism, direct and govern. Among them there are, in reality, only a dozen leading figures. From time to time an elite of the working class is called together to applaud

1. Rosa Luxemburg, “Zur russischen Revolution,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, 5 vols. (Berlin, 1970–75), vol. 4, 5th printing (1990): *August 1914 bis Januar 1919*, (hereafter *GW*:4), 359. In this edition, the crucial passage was placed in a footnote along with the comment that it was written in the margins without a mark indicating its placement in the text. The passage was widely known, however, so GDR citizens must have read footnotes. They might also have encountered the passage in Fred Oelssner’s attack, *Rosa Luxemburg: Eine kritische biographische Skizze* (Berlin, 1952), 124, where her call for freedom of thought was labelled “dangerous . . . and in the revolution it leads unavoidably to defeat because it signifies freedom for the counterrevolution.” Paul Levi, who first published the pamphlet as *Die Russische Revolution* (Berlin, 1922), made the crucial passage an integral part of the text, which has been followed in other editions, including the English-language one translated by Bertram D. Wolfe in 1940 and republished by him in *Rosa Luxemburg, The Russian Revolution and Leninism or Marxism?* (Ann Arbor, 1961) and the West German editions edited by Ossip K. Flechtheim, *Die russische Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main, 1963) and Rosa Luxemburg, *Politische Schriften*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main, 1968). In 1928 Felix Weil made some important textual changes and additions to Levi’s edition, but these did not alter the overall sense of her writing: “Rosa Luxemburg über Russische Revolution,” *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung* 13 (Leipzig, 1928): 285–98.

the speeches of the leaders and to approve unanimously proposed resolutions . . . [This is] to be sure a dictatorship, but only of a handful of politicians, not of the proletariat . . . [This condition] culminates in the degeneration of public life: assassinations, the shooting of hostages, etc. That is an overpowering objective law that no party can evade.²

Yet for all of her democratic sensibilities—and despite the immense and largely uncritical following she has won—Luxemburg’s conception of democratic politics is immensely problematic, reflecting the insufficiencies of both the Marxian socialist tradition and her own particular contribution to it.³ Most seriously, politics for Luxemburg always aimed *auf das Ganze*, a totalizing position fully in keeping with the Marxian tradition, but raised to new heights by her unswerving celebration of mass activism. As a result, she devoted precious little attention to the institutional grounding of a democratic-socialist polity. Instead, she continually promoted mass activism in demonstrations and strikes *both as a tactic* for accomplishing the tradition from capitalism to socialism and *as the substance* of democracy. Unwilling to countenance compromise even with other socialists, she infused her politics with the language of unwavering hostility to the institutions of bourgeois society, of militant and irreconcilable conflict between the forces of revolution and reaction, of hard-fought class struggle and proletarian revolution as the sole and exclusive means of political progress.

Luxemburg, in short, was not only the exponent of democracy, but also of a politics of totality and of unrelenting militant activism. The complex and unstable mix she forged resonated through the history of German communism, and official as well as oppositional elements claimed her legacy. Her significance extended far deeper than her symbolic stature

In the manuscript, the paragraph with the phrase “Freiheit ist immer Freiheit der Andersdenkenden” is in the margins, but does have an insertion mark at the end. However, there is no corresponding mark in the text, a practice Luxemburg followed with other marginal comments that she meant to be included in the body of the text. My guess is that Luxemburg simply forgot to place the mark in the text, I looked at photocopies of the original in the Luxemburg papers, Institut für Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung, Zentrales Parteiarchiv (hereafter IGA, ZPA) NL 2/15, “Zur russischen Revolution,” B1. 100. A photo of the important page is included in Annelies Laschitzka, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg und die Freiheit der Andersdenkenden: Extraausgabe des unvollendeten Manuskripts “Zur russischen Revolution” und anderer Quellen zur Polemik mit Lenin* (Berlin, 1990), 152.

Along with the *Gesammelte Werke* cited above, critical to any reading of Luxemburg are the *Gesammelte Briefe*, 5 vols., ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED (Berlin, 1982–1984) (hereafter *GB*). One or two additional volumes of each, translations from her Polish writings, are currently in the works. For the history of the Luxemburg publications, see Annelies Laschitzka, “Zum Umgang mit Rosa Luxemburg in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* (hereafter *BzG*) 33 no. 4 (1991): 435–52.

2. Luxemburg, “Zur russischen Revolution,” 360, 362.

3. The literature on Luxemburg is voluminous, and the vast majority of it is rather

uncritical, at times hagiographical. Even Peter Nettel, in his magisterial biography, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1966), is a bit too uncritical of his subject, and Hannah Arendt's critical acumen also wanes when it comes to Luxemburg: "Rosa Luxemburg, 1871–1919," a review of Nettel's biography originally published in the *New York Review of Books* in idem, *Men in Dark Times* (New York, 1968), 33–56. Geoff Eley's insightful essay, "The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg," *Critique* (Glasgow) 12 (Autumn–Winter 1979–80): 139–49, provides one of the few critical readings of Luxemburg. Eley's comments are built around a review of Norman Geras's interesting but flawed work, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg* (London, 1976). Georg W. Strobel, in another exception from the generally uncritical considerations of Luxemburg, offers a scathing critique in "Die Legende von der Rosa Luxemburg: Eine politisch-historische Betrachtung," *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* 28 no. 3 (September 1992): 373–94. While correct in many of his particular charges, Strobel's critique is so unrelenting that Luxemburg's complexities and contradictions fade from view. Elzbieta Ettinger's recent and engaging *Rosa Luxemburg: A Life* (Boston, 1986) focuses on the personal side, while Richard Abraham, *Rosa Luxemburg: A Life for the International* (Oxford, 1989) provides a very effective and mildly critical overview of her life and politics. The leading German historian of the KPD/SED, Hermann Weber, is also largely uncritical of Luxemburg. He sees only the democratic aspects of her politics, not the revolutionary elements that facilitated the incorporation of her ideas into the official ideology of the KPD/SED. In a particularly misplaced effort to distinguish among bureaucratic-dictatorial, revolutionary, and democratic communism, he places Luxemburg only in the latter camp, thereby ignoring her pronounced revolutionary commitments, and fails to provide any critical appraisal of her views. See his essays, "Die SED and Rosa Luxemburg," in Hermann Weber, *Aufbau und Fall einer Diktatur: Kritische Beiträge zur Geschichte der DDR* (Cologne, 1991), 154–57; "Demokratischer Kommunismus: Robert Havemann und die Problematik des demokratischen Kommunismus in der DDR," in Weber, *Kommunistische Bewegung und realsozialistischer Staat*, ed. Werner Müller (Cologne, 1988), 104–15 and esp. 106–8; and "Einleitung," in Weber, ed., *Der Gründungsparteitag der KPD: Protokoll und Materialien*, (Frankfurt am Main, 1969), 47–48. For discussions and examples of the continuing interest in Luxemburg, see many of the contributions to the 1990 symposium on Luxemburg hosted by the Institut für Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung and published in *BzG* 33 no. 4 (1991); Helmut Trotnow, "Vom Ende keine Spur—Die Historiker werden immer noch von Rosa Luxemburg fasziniert," *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* 27 no. 1 (March 1991): 43–49; and the contributions to a symposium held in Italy in the 1970s, published in Lelio Basso, ed. *Rosa Luxemburg e lo sviluppo del pensiero marxista*, in *Annali del Fondazione Lelio e Lisli Basso-Issoco* (Rome, 1976). Manfred Scharrer, virtually alone among the participants in the Berlin symposium, provides a critical assessment of Luxemburg's politics in "Demokratie und Diktatur bei Rosa Luxemburg," *BzG* 33 no. 4 (1991): 469–74.

Luxemburg has had resonance far beyond academic circles and the traditional parties of the LEFT. She has served as the inspiration for a number of artistic efforts and has been claimed by new social movements and especially by feminists. Though some feminists have attacked Luxemburg for her relative silence on women's issues, by and large the reception in these circles has been as uncritical as that among academics and those who identify with the social democratic and communist movements. For just a few examples, see Kristine von Soden, ed., *Zeitmontage: Rosa Luxemburg* (Berlin, 1988); Stephen Eric Bronner, *A Revolutionary for Our Times: Rosa Luxemburg* (London, 1981); Cynthia Navaretta, ed., *Voices of Women: 3 Critics on 3 Poets on 3 Heroines* (New York, 1980); May Stevens, Melissa Dabakis, and Janis Bell, eds., *Rosa/Alice, Ordinary/Extraordinary* (New York, 1988), catalogue of a 1988 exhibit by May Stevens, as well as the commentary by Carol Jacobsen, "Two Lives: Ordinary/Extraordinary," *Art in America* (February 1989): 153ff.; and of course Margarethe von Trotta's extraordinary film, "Rosa Luxemburg," reviewed by Geoff Eley in the *American Historical Review* 94 no. 4 (October 1989): 1039–41. For a particularly strained reading of Luxemburg as a feminist, see Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Urbana, 1991).

as a militant socialist and the martyred founder of German communism. Luxemburg's rhetoric, trumpeted in the party press, in bound volumes, and in commemorative meetings and demonstrations, constituted a central element in the ideological formation of the party and, in the German Democratic Republic, in the party-state's construction of legitimacy. To be sure, Luxemburg's intellectual and political legacy was mobilized in a selective and manipulative fashion—as are all ideological traditions—but the very content and timbre of her language and ideas facilitated their incorporation into the communist movement and state.⁴ Far from being erased from historical memory in the KPD/SED or simply misappropriated in the service of party rule, Luxemburg's legacy was mobilized in eminently recognizable ways.⁵

The paper that follows, then, is designed as a reconsideration of both Luxemburg's politics and the history of German communism. While not at all contesting the reality of Luxemburg's deeply held democratic convictions, I will argue that her conception of democratic politics was gravely inadequate to the task of constructing a democratic socialist movement and polity. These same inadequacies—evident in both the content of her ideas and in her language, her manner of exposition—constituted central elements of the ideological and rhetorical orientation of the KPD/SED. Through the cultural practices of the party in both the Weimar Republic and the GDR—the daily press, book publications, speeches, visual representations, commemorative demonstrations and meetings, all of which I will explore in the second section of the paper—Luxemburg's legacy became inscribed into the world of German communism.⁶

The following is also intended to demonstrate the deficiencies of the standard Western German accounts of the history of German communism,

4. By focusing on language I do mean, in Peter Schöttler's Foucauldian-derived definition of discourse, "a socially institutionalised mode of speech/writing with effects of power and or/assistance . . ." Or as he quotes Foucault's programmatic statement: ". . . one no longer attempts to uncover the great enigmatic statement that lies hidden beneath its [discourse's] signs; one asks how it functions; what representation it designates, what elements it cuts out and removes, how it analyses and composes, what play of substitutions enables it to accomplish its role of representation." Peter Schöttler, "Historians and Discourse Analysis," *History Workshop Journal* 27 (Spring 1989): n. 2, 55, 41–42. The quote is from Foucault's *The Order of Things*. In the case of Luxemburg, this means exploring the way she develops a discourse with specific words and phrases that inspire sympathies and activism, but that also create exclusions. However, ideas are not reducible to or identical with language; language may be constitutive of meaning, but the content of ideas is also subject to intellectual critique. Hence, I hold on to a distinction between language and ideas in this paper, and attempt to address both. Finally, I accept here, in perhaps modified fashion, the poststructuralist insight that texts are subject to diverse readings, and that authorial intent may be less relevant than the uses to which texts are put by their diverse audiences. In Luxemburg's case, the very complexity and instability of her ideas and language made their meanings extremely mobile and open to a wide range of interpretations.

now being reiterated, ironically enough, by appraisals emanating from the former German Democratic Republic. In this master narrative, found in both scholarly and popular forms, a young, democratic-radical Communist party, rooted in the traditions of the German labor movement and inspired by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, fell victim to the machinations of Soviet communism. By the end of the 1920s, the KPD had become a “Stalinized” party that increasingly took on the character of its Soviet mentor. Practices developed out of Russian conditions were grafted on to German politics and society, and the initial democratic impulses of the party, articulated most forcefully by Luxemburg, were increasingly replaced by the dictatorial methods characteristic of Lenin and Stalin. The authoritarian state socialism of the GDR marked the inevitable culmination of this process, the imposition onto German soil of an alien form of politics.⁷

Helpful on language and the wide-ranging debate about poststructuralism are Schöttler, “Historians and Discourse Analysis;” Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner, “Introduction,” in the collection they edited, *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (Princeton, 1994), 3–45; the discussion in Lenard R. Berlanstein, ed., *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis* (Urbana, 1993); the special issue of *Central European History* 22, nos. 3/4 (September/December 1989) on “German Histories: Challenges in Theory, Practice, Technique,” and especially Jane Caplan’s essay, “Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Deconstruction: Notes for Historians,” 260–78; and Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988).

5. Ossip K. Flechtheims’s *Die KPD in der Weimarer Republik* (1948; Hamburg, 1986), for example, hardly mentions anything about Luxemburg after her death. Weber’s essays, “Die SED und Rosa Luxemburg”; “Demokratischer Kommunismus: Robert Havemann und die Problematik des demokratischen Kommunismus in der DDR”; and “Einleitung,” *Gründungsparteitag*, all convey the idea that Luxemburg’s legacy was simply misappropriated by the party.

6. These efforts serve as one part of a larger historical exploration of the formative history of the KPD and its influence on the development of the German Democratic Republic in the post-World War II world. A more complete account would need to engage also the sociopolitical history of the Weimar Republic and its impact on the party, but here I will restrict myself to the ideological, linguistic, and cultural dimensions.

7. See Hermann Weber, *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus: Die Stalinisierung der KPD in der Weimarer Republik*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1969) and, along with many other writings, his recent collection of essays, *Kommunistische Bewegung*, see n. 3. Similar views may be found in other standard histories, e.g., Flechtheim, *Die KPD in der Weimarer Republik*; Siegfried Bahne, *Die KPD und das Ende von Weimar: Das Scheitern einer Politik 1932–1935* (Frankfurt am Main, 1976); and Heinrich August Winkler’s three-volume trilogy on Weimar labor, which generally follows Weber in relation to the KPD: *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung: Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik 1918 bis 1924* (Berlin, 1984); *Der Schein der Normalität: Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik 1924 bis 1930* (Berlin, 1988); and *Der Weg in die Katastrophe: Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik 1930 bis 1933* (Berlin, 1990). For views from the former GDR and other former socialist countries, see many of the contributions to the 1990 symposium on Luxemburg in *BzG* 33 no. 4 (1991). For a different argument that stresses the long-term continuities in German communist (and liberal, socialist, and conservative) politics, see Jeffrey Herf, “Multiple Restorations: German Political Traditions and the Interpretation of Nazism, 1945–1946,” *Central European History* 26 no. 1 (1993): 21–55. While the political motivations for the Luxemburg revival and the reappraisals of

But the erection of a nearly impermeable boundary between early (good) and mature (bad) communism obscures the fluidity between them.⁸ Never merely a creature of Soviet design, German communism's emergence *and development* drew upon a historical and ideological matrix rooted in German *and* Soviet history. Far from being the passive recipient of ideological forces emanating from Moscow, the KPD in the course of the Weimar Republic joined positions common to Luxemburg and Lenin with Lenin's emphasis on a disciplined party organization and a powerful central state. By the late 1920s, the Luxemburgist-Leninist hybrid was increasingly subject to Stalin's particularly authoritarian interpretation of Leninism, but major elements of Luxemburg's orientation, shorn of the democratic sensibility with which she endowed them, retained their vitality in the KPD and on into the SED.

Rosa Luxemburg and the Ideological Formation of the KPD in the Weimar Republic

Rosa Luxemburg developed her political ideas in the context of the pre-World War I Polish, Russian, and German socialist movements. She came to prominence first in the revisionist controversy with her spirited defense of revolutionary politics and her equally spirited attacks on Eduard Bernstein and his effort to move social democracy down the path of reform.⁹ During the 1905 Revolution in Russia she found inspiration in the mass activism of Russian and Polish workers, which led her to develop further her incisive critique of bureaucratism in the German and international socialist movement. Luxemburg argued that not party directives, but the spontaneous actions of workers, culminating in the mass strike and revolution, would serve as the means of political transformation. Her rhetoric in her most famous pamphlet, "The Mass Strike," soared into celebrations of mass activism in the streets.¹⁰ While never rejecting the importance of

the KPD in the former GDR are understandable, these efforts do little to move along the theoretical and practical efforts to deepen German democracy.

8. The connection between the different phases of communist history is a major theme, perhaps *the* major theme, in Russian and Soviet historiography. In the German case, the break between two periods has gone virtually unquestioned.

9. See especially Luxemburg, "Sozialreform oder Revolution?," (1899) in *GW*:1/1: 1893 bis 1905, 7th printing (1970; Berlin, 1990), 367–466, as well as numerous other writings from this period. In English as "Reform or Revolution?," in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. Mary-Alice Waters (New York, 1970), 33–90.

10. See especially Luxemburg, "Die Revolution in Russland," (1905) in *GW*:1/2: 1893 bis 1905, 6th printing (1970; Berlin, 1988), 500–18; idem, "In revolutionärer Stunde: Was weiter?," in *GW*:1/2, 554–72; and, most famously, idem, "Massenstreik, Partei und Gewerkschaften," (1906) in *GW*:2: 1906 bis Juni 1911, 5th printing (1972; Berlin, 1990), 91–170. The latter is excerpted in English as "The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions," in Waters, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, 153–218.

the party, Luxemburg's idealization of spontaneous activism shaded into anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist strands of politics. The very notion that the SPD, the beacon of ideological clarity and the *parti modèle* for other members of the Second International, could learn from the "less advanced" Russian and Polish workers marked a dramatic break from the standard line of socialist thought in Germany.¹¹

When the SPD Reichstag delegation voted to support Germany's involvement in World War I, Luxemburg fell into the deepest despair, but soon roused herself to feverish activity designed to organize the socialist opposition to the war. For Luxemburg, the SPD's capitulation to the war effort only confirmed the critique she had developed prior to 1914. Indeed, the line of causation was crystal clear: The triumph of bureaucracy and reformism in the party before World War I paved the way for its utter betrayal of the socialist cause in 1914, leaving the SPD with blood-stained hands. The war had at least forced reformism to display its true colors; the situation was now clear. The task ahead lay in forging a re-vivified socialist politics that would center around mass activism and would countenance no compromise on the road to revolution—a course that a socialist leadership worthy of its name would help incite and support.¹² For her socialist colleagues in the SPD and USPD, Luxemburg had only contempt—a sentiment sustained not only by the deepest political disagreements, but also by the Majority Socialists' refusal even to defend radicals like Luxemburg and Liebknecht against the repressive actions of the state.¹³

Imprisoned for most of the last two years of the war, she emerged to find her erstwhile socialist colleagues ensconced in the offices of the state, brought to power by a revolution that seemed to herald the new order. Energized by the strikes and demonstrations that engulfed Germany in

11. Still useful are the classic essays by Annie Kriegel, "Le parti modèle (La Social-Démocratie allemande et la IIe Internationale), in idem, *Le Pain et les roses: Jalons pour une histoire des socialismes* (Paris, 1968), 159–73, and by J. P. Nettl, "The German Social-Democratic Party 1890–1914 as a Political Model," *Past & Present* 30 (1965): 65–96.

12. Most clearly in her famous "Junius-Brochure," in *GW*:4, 49–164. See also the outline, "Entwurf zu den Junius-Thesen," in *ibid.*, 43–47, which, with some editorial changes, was published as an appendix to Junius as "Leitsätze über die Aufgaben der internationalen Sozialdemokratie," as well as Luxemburg's exchange with Karl Liebknecht and Julian Marchlewski over the wording of the "Leitsätze," Luxemburg to Karl Liebknecht, December 1915 and Luxemburg to Julian Marchlewski, December 1915, in Luxemburg, *GB*:5, 89–92. An accessible, excerpted English translation of the Junius brochure is in Waters, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, 257–331. Her position is also articulated in the *Spartakusbriefe*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED (Berlin, 1958), which were first published together by the KPD in the 1920s, and in many of her letters, e.g. Luxemburg to Carl Moor, 12 October 1914; to Hans Diefenbach, 1 November 1914; and to Franz Mehring, 31 August 1915, all in *GB*:5, 15–16, 19–20, 70–72. See also her first published comment on the collapse of the SPD and the International, which appeared in April 1915: "Der Wiederaufbau der Internationale," in *GW*:4, 20.

13. Many of her letters from the war convey quite poignantly her deeply-felt sense of

the winter of 1918/19, she wasted no time in gathering her comrades and laying out a political course that again drew upon the ideas she had developed before 1914, but that now, amid the Bolshevik Revolution, the end of World War I, and the German Revolution, took on even greater urgency: support for mass activism, active propagation of revolution, a determination to derail a socialist politics of reform and, instead, to build, through revolution, a socialist society in the here and now. Her language and ideas, articulated in the heat of revolution and in response to biting and even vicious criticism from the SPD and USPD, became, if anything, more fervent. Her interventions in this period concerned the most crucial issues of revolutionary politics—the nature of democracy and of socialism, the problems of the transition from capitalism to socialism, and the intractable dilemma of political terror. The stance she adopted on these issues shaped many aspects of the KPD's ideological orientation, and, in derivative and altered form, those of the SED as well.

In the first months of the German Revolution, the major debate revolved around the character of the political system, that is, whether Germany should become a parliamentary democracy, with the election of a Constitutional Assembly as the first step, or a council republic, a political system built upon the workers and soldiers councils. Luxemburg, with an intransigent language designed to override and exclude any opposing voices, sharply sketched out her opposition to a parliamentary system and to the politics of majority rule. For her, a democratically-elected Constitutional Assembly would only signify

an obsolete relic of bourgeois revolutions, a shell without content, an item from the period of petit-bourgeois illusions about the “unitary people” . . . Whoever takes up the call today for a Constitutional Assembly . . . is only a secret agent of the bourgeoisie or an unconscious ideologue of the petit bourgeoisie.¹⁴

In “The Russian Revolution” she lauded the Bolsheviks for their revolutionary audacity, their refusal to follow the chimera of majority rule. The Bolsheviks have demonstrated the true dialectic of revolution, she argued:

loss and despair, but also her determination to forge a revived socialist politics. The white heat of her anger against both the Majority and Independent Socialists is sometimes even more evident in her letters than in her published writings, as in a letter to Mathilde Wurm, 28 December 1916, GB:5, 150–51. That she drew inspiration from the increasing levels of anti-war activism beginning in 1916 and then again from the Russian Revolution is clear from her letters. See, for example, Luxemburg to Helene Winkler, 11 February 1915; Marta Rosenbaum, 9 February 1917; Luise Kautsky, 15 April 1917; Marta Rosenbaum, 29 April 1917; all in GB:5, 46, 167–68, 207–8, 226–27.

14. Luxemburg, “Die Nationalversammlung,” *Die Rote Fahne* (hereafter *RF*), 20 November 1918, *GW*:4, 407–10, quote 409.

... not through a majority to revolutionary tactics, but through revolutionary tactics to a majority—that is the way the road runs.¹⁵

The rejection of electoral and parliamentary politics also found fervent expression at the KPD's founding congress, which convened at the very end of December 1918. While the syndicalist-oriented left radicals in attendance rejected any electoral participation as a diversion from the task of revolution, Luxemburg and her followers supported participation, but on tactical grounds only.¹⁶ Expressing her long-standing commitment to mass activism, she argued that parliament was only a subsidiary sphere of action to the streets:

We will still have to take to the streets, our tactics are based on developing the major actions in the streets... The streets should everywhere lead to power and victory. Inside the Constitutional Assembly we want to raise a victorious banner that is built upon actions on the outside. We want to blast this bulwark from the inside.¹⁷

In opposition to a Constitutional Assembly, Luxemburg proposed a political system based on the workers and soldiers councils. In her sketch of the revolutionary political order—one of the very rare instances in which she devoted some attention to the institutional grounding of politics—Luxemburg proposed a system of councils running through all the political and economic institutions of the nation.¹⁸ This entailed a far more active role for the councils than they had actually played in most localities, where most often the councils only sought to supervise (*überwachen*) the regular municipal and regional state officials or the workplace management. Luxemburg's conception of a council system signified an effort radically to broaden the public sphere, to extend the political space in which workers and working-class power would operate. In this sense, the notion was deeply democratic. Not the organs of bourgeois class rule, but those of the popular masses would govern society. These organs would exist in "continual, vital interchange" with the population, thereby infusing the state with the spirit of socialism.¹⁹ Through their activities in the councils, workers would learn how to become free, thinking, self-determining directors of the economy and polity.

15. Luxemburg, "Zur russischen Revolution," *GW*:4, 341.

16. Even Paul Levi, later to return to the Independent Social Democratic party (USPD) and then the Social Democratic party (SPD), never defended the *intrinsic* worth of parliamentary structures. See the passages in Weber, ed., *Gründungsparteitag*, 89–90, 134.

17. *Ibid.*, 128.

18. Luxemburg, "Was will der Spartakusbund?" *RF*, 14 December 1918, *GW*:4, 440–49, esp. 446 and Weber, ed., *Gründungsparteitag*, 197–98. See also the speech by Lange at the founding congress introducing the discussion on the economic aspects of the program, in Weber, ed., *Gründungsparteitag*, 138–49 and esp. 147–48.

19. Luxemburg, "Was will der Spartakusbund?" *GW*:4, 442.

While infused with democratic sensibilities, Luxemburg's conception of the councils failed to address a myriad of fundamental issues. To Luxemburg, a "true" workers and soldiers council could only be revolutionary in nature. A moderately-inclined council system, dedicated to cogovernance perhaps but not to complete power, never came into her purview. Hence, the instrumental nature of her politics, which had fore-ordained the goals, at least in general terms, of working-class political action, and sought only the most efficient means of reaching them. She could not even begin to address, intellectually or politically, the possibility of conflict between a "true" socialist system and the popular masses. Luxemburg expressed that Marxian utopianism that imagined all social conflicts erased from the human tableau with the onset of working-class power. When faced with the choice between imperfect councils and raising the revolutionary fervor in the streets, she opted almost instinctively for the latter course.

To be sure, Luxemburg offered the usual protestations that any attempt to delineate the future society in detail signified a reversion to utopian socialism. Instead, the contours of the future would be determined by self-directing social actors. She also wrote into the Spartacus program such highly democratic features as new elections of the Central Council every three months and the right of local councils to recall their delegates.²⁰ But rights of recall have rarely been exercised even in the best functioning democracies, and the eternal dilemma between bureaucratic entrenchment and popular participation has never been resolved by the almost continual reshuffling of political leadership. Moreover, she made clear in the Spartacus program that only workers and soldiers would have suffrage rights in elections to the councils.²¹ The potential problems of disenfranchising entire segments of the population—not just Junkers, officers, and industrialists, but also the broad and diverse middle classes and small landholders—went completely unexamined. By failing to provide insight into the realities of postrevolutionary social conflicts and workable democratic safeguards in a council system, Luxemburg, no less than Lenin, opened the way for the arbitrary exercise of power as the means of resolving conflicts—despite her own strong and undeniable democratic sensibilities.

Moreover, to Luxemburg (and to other radicals), the council system seems to have been understood as equivalent to the dictatorship of the proletariat, a term she continually promoted. Even in her critique of the

20. *Ibid.*, point II:5, *GW*:4, 446. The Spartacus Group was the organization formed during the war by Rosa Luxemburg. It functioned within the SPD and then, beginning in 1917, the USPD. It became the major but not exclusive force behind the founding of the KPD. The Spartacus program, written by Luxemburg and published in mid-December 1918, was then adopted as the program for the KPD two weeks later at its founding congress.

21. *Ibid.*, point II:3, *GW*:4, 446.

Russian Revolution, she only chastised the Bolsheviks for the manner in which they created the dictatorship, not its substance:

The basic error of the Lenin-Trotsky theory is that, just like Kautsky, they oppose dictatorship to democracy. "Dictatorship or democracy" constitutes the formulation by the Bolsheviks as well as by Kautsky . . . It [the proletariat] should and must pursue immediately socialist measures in the most energetic, uncompromising, determined manner. It must, that is, exercise a dictatorship, got a dictatorship of the *class*, not of a party or a clique. Dictatorship of the class means in the broadest public, with unlimited democracy, with the most active, unrestricted participation of the masses.²²

If the Bolsheviks established, in her view, a false dichotomy between democracy and dictatorship, Luxemburg merely elides the two. Her language slides all too easily between dictatorship and democracy. While some might argue that such criticism is anachronistic, it should have been clear, even in 1919, that the dictatorship of the class could not at all be equivalent to the "dictatorship in the broadest public," or, as she also termed it, a dictatorship that would be under the control of the "entire public [*gesamten Öffentlichkeit*],"²³ whether the essential class is defined sociologically or politically. Ultimately for Luxemburg, the institutionalization of the councils cum dictatorship of the proletariat was the means of expanding the political sphere with the goal of abolishing politics, to create, in the famous words, the system whereby the administration of things would replace the administration of men. But administration of things, in its utopian guise, is simply an effort to replace a politics of mediation with a thinly disguised politics of totality.²⁴

These maximalist positions were, for Luxemburg, the very essence of politics. A politics of mediating differences, of rational discourse about the common good, never entered her field of vision. She wrote disparagingly of the German Revolution:

Ach, how German is this Revolution—how German! How sober, how pedantic, without verve, without brilliance, without greatness.²⁵

As she wrote when the Revolution was barely three weeks old:

And what has changed for the masses of workers in their daily wages, in their living conditions? Nothing at all or as good as nothing at all! A few meager concessions are made here and there, and then right off

22. Luxemburg, "Zur russischen Revolution," *GW*:4, 362–63.

23. *Ibid.*, 363–64.

24. See A.J. Polan, *Lenin and the End of Politics* (London, 1984).

25. Luxemburg, "Eine Ehrenpflicht," *RF*, 18 November 1918, *GW*:4, 404–6, quote 405.

the employers try to deprive the proletariat once again of the slightest benefits.²⁶

A curious picture of the Revolution this! The fact that democratic norms had been established, that workers had gained many of the demands for which they had long struggled—the eight-hour day, union recognition, higher wages, equal suffrage rights—none of this was of much concern to Luxemburg. Or, to put it differently, it concerned her only as a first step to the more complete revolution. To Luxemburg, only a politics of revolution that rejected thirty years of social democratic practice, a politics that signified the actualization of the world-historical tasks of the proletariat, was worthy of the name:

... for us there is no longer a minimum and a maximum program. Socialism is one and the same; that is the minimum, which we today must establish ...²⁷

This determination to forge a politics of totality only contributed to the language of invective inscribed into the communist movement at its beginning. Luxemburg erected rhetorical barricades designed to make pariahs out of anyone who challenged the revolutionary road to socialism. Her adversaries, no less intransigent, joined her in a rhetoric of denunciation both personal and political. Luxemburg's ire knew no bounds when it came to the social democratic Ebert-Scheidemann government, the "agent" of the bourgeoisie.²⁸ About the Independent Social Democrats she was even more scathing. In highly charged, gendered language, she claimed that they prostituted their own supposed politics by joining the SPD in the revolutionary government, that they mediated and conciliated and negotiated, and altogether lacked the "manly resolve" required for a clear, revolutionary politics.²⁹ In words that bear an uneasy resemblance to the Comintern's later "social fascist" line, which made unremitting attacks on social democracy, the last bulwark of capitalism, the quintessence of revolutionary politics, Luxemburg wrote:

The conflict with the capitalist class signifies in Germany first and foremost the settling of accounts with Scheidemann-Ebert, who provide the wall of protection for the bourgeoisie. And the settling of accounts with the Scheidemanns presupposes the liquidation of the USPD [the

26. Luxemburg, "Der Acheron in Bewegung," *RF*, 27 November 1918, *GW*:4, 419–22, quote 419.

27. Weber, ed., *Gründungsparteitag*, 181. For a far more positive reading of Luxemburg's maximalism and her theoretical commitment to totality, see Lelio Basso, "Il contributo di Rosa Luxemburg," in idem, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg*, 15–27.

28. Luxemburg, "Auf die Schanzen," *RF*, 15 December 1918, *GW*:4, 452–58, quote 451.

29. Luxemburg, "Parteitag der Unabhängigen SP," *RF*, 29 November 1918, *GW*:4, 423–26, quotes 423, 424.

Independent Social Democratic party], which functions as the protective wall for Ebert-Scheidemann.³⁰

Such rhetorical and ideological intransigence *prima facie* ruled out any kind of strategy that included cross-party, let alone cross-class, political alliances. As she wrote in the Spartacus program:

The Spartacus group declines to share governmental power with those hacks of the bourgeoisie, Scheidemann-Ebert, because it sees in such collaboration a betrayal of the principles of socialism, a strengthening of the counterrevolution, and a crippling of the Revolution.³¹

All the difficulties with Luxemburg's conceptions of democracy and dictatorship are only heightened in her highly amorphous and even contradictory discussion of terror. Her rhetoric and logic, generally so powerful, become notably mundane and even trite when she addresses the use of terror as a political weapon. Substantively, she claimed to reject terror. In the party program, she wrote:

The proletarian revolution does not need terror to accomplish its goals, it hates and abhors the murder of people.³²

In some of the least compelling passages of her usually insightful and moving corpus, she descends to platitudes and to crass determinism to explain the distinctiveness of the proletarian revolution and the irrelevance of terror for it:

It [the proletarian revolution] does not need these methods of struggle [terror] because it struggles against institutions, not individuals. It does not enter the arena with naive illusions, whose inevitable unfulfillment it would then feel compelled to avenge in a bloody manner. It is no desperate attempt of a minority to model forcibly the world after its ideals, but the action of the great mass of millions of people, who are called to fulfill the historical mission and to make reality out of historical necessity.³³

Yet immediately afterwards, in a passage worth quoting at length, she defends armed struggle and political coercion in the hands of the proletariat:

But the proletarian revolution is at the same time the death knell for each and every form of subordination and oppression. For this reason all of the capitalists, Junkers, petty capitalists, officers, all the parasites

30. Luxemburg, "Das Versagen der Führer," *RF*, 11 November 1919, *GW*:4, 523–26, quote 526.

31. Luxemburg, "Was will der Spartakusbund?" *GW*:4, 448.

32. *Ibid.*, 443.

33. *Ibid.*, 443. See also her article, "Ein gewagtes Spiel," *RF*, 24 November 1918, *GW*:4, 411–14.

and the beneficiaries of exploitation and class power—they all align together as one man and raise the life and death struggle against the proletarian revolution.

It is sheer nonsense to believe that the capitalists will accept the socialist verdict of a parliament or constitutional assembly, that they will calmly give up their property and profit and privileges of exploitation. All ruling classes have clung to their privileges to the very end with the fiercest tenacity. The Roman patricians and the medieval feudal barons, the English cavaliers and the American slave traders, the Wallachian boyars and the Lyon silk manufacturers—they have all spilled rivers of blood, they have left a trail of corpses, and murders, and fires, they have ignited civil war and treason, all to defend their privileges and their power.

As the last scion of the exploiting class, the imperialist capitalist class surpasses the brutality, the open cynicism, the baseness of all of its predecessors. It will exert every effort, fight tooth and nail, use every method of cold evil to defend its profits and its privileged right of exploitation . . . It will move heaven and earth against the proletariat.³⁴

If one can only expect rivers of blood once again, if the bourgeoisie will move heaven and earth to defeat the working class, then how can the counterterror of the proletariat *not* be appropriate? The whole rhetorical structure of the passage moves toward the acceptance of terror in the hands of the proletariat, and the rejections appear as mere disclaimers.

This becomes even clearer in the subsequent paragraphs of the KPD program:

All this opposition [of the capitalist class] must be broken step by step with iron fists, with ruthless energy. Against the power of the bourgeois counterrevolution, must be set the revolutionary power of the proletariat. Against the blows, intrigues, and chains of the bourgeoisie, the unbending clarity of goals, the vigilance, and the ever-ready activism of the proletarian masses. Against the threatening danger of counterrevolution, the arming of the people and the disarming of the ruling classes. Against the omnipresent power of bourgeois society, the concentrated, tightly drawn, ever increasing power of the working class . . .

The struggle for socialism is the most powerful civil war ever seen in world history. The proletarian revolution must prepare the necessary armaments for this civil war, it must learn to use them—in the struggle and in victory.³⁵

Karl Liebknecht gave the game away during the debate on the use of terror at the founding congress of the KPD. He noted that while Luxemburg's

34. *Ibid.*, 443–44.

35. *Ibid.*, 444–45.

text outrightly rejected the use of terror, it also immediately readmitted its possibility:

It says in the program: The proletariat as such, when things go its way, does not want terror, does not need terror. But it also says that we have to expect that the ruling classes will defend their positions of power tooth and nail, and that it is the task of the proletariat to smite with all recklessness, with iron fist, this resistance of the ruling classes and all counterrevolutionary efforts. (Right! Bravo!)

With that is expressed the point that we are not thinking of making a lemonade revolution,

(Very good!)

but that we are determined to raise the iron fist and to crush whoever resists the social revolution of the proletariat.

(Lively applause.)³⁶

Luxemburg's own rhetoric often soared into celebrations of revolutionary coercion, as in the powerful ending to the KPD program:

Proletarians! To the struggle! There is a world to conquer and a world to combat. In this last class struggle of world history, this effort to realize the highest goals of humanity, apply to the enemy the words: Thumb on the eye and knee on the chest!³⁷

Or as she said at an USPD meeting, two days after the initial publication of the program in *Rote Fahne*:

Socialism does not mean sitting together in a parliament and passing laws. Socialism signifies the suppression of the ruling class with all of the brutality that the proletariat can bring to bear in its struggle.³⁸

Certainly, Luxemburg's own language reached new levels of intensity in response to the SPD's and USPD's efforts to marginalize the Spartacists, and to the highly personalized, often vicious attacks against her sponsored by both Social Democrats and Conservatives.³⁹ She had little doubt about

36. Weber, ed., *Gründungsparteitag*, 222. Other delegates, like Paul Fröhlich, were less perceptive than Liebknecht and criticized what they saw as Luxemburg's blanket rejection of terror. See *Gründungsparteitag*, 202–4, as well as other contributions to the debate on 207–8 and 216–17.

37. Luxemburg, "Was will der Spartakusbund?" *GW*:4, 449.

38. *Freiheit*, 17 December 1918, *GW*:4, 459.

39. Most fatefully in the poem published in the SPD organ *Vorwärts* two days before the assassination of Liebknecht and Luxemburg:

Many hundreds of dead in a row,

proletarians . . .

Karl, Rosa, Radek & Company,

None of them are there, none of them are there,

proletarians!

what was at stake: she understood the Bolshevik Revolution as a world-historical event, one that could be matched in Germany if the proletariat took up the cause. The failure to do so would mean, once again, the descent into barbarism, a barbarism perhaps even worse than the carnage of World War I.⁴⁰

However much the political context explains the fiery character of Luxemburg's rhetoric, however easy it is now to critique her faith in the moral rectitude of the proletariat, ultimately, Luxemburg's own language and ideas undermined her highly developed democratic sensibilities. The combativeness and intransigence of her language admitted no room for political compromise, and granted "true" political agency only to those who followed her revolutionary course. Her politics hinged on a traditional Marxian belief in historical determinism fueled by the political activism of the proletariat. Luxemburg posited, for all of her democratic beliefs, an intrinsically instrumental politics since the end point—the revolutionary transformation of capitalism—is predetermined. Indeed, given the idealization of the proletariat and the historical determinism that underpinned socialist ideas, politics could *only* be instrumental. Hence, the need, through a politics of action, "to enlighten [*aufzuklären*]" and "to instruct [*zu schulen*]" the as yet "unripe" proletarian masses.⁴¹ Luxemburg presumed that, properly instructed, the proletariat *will* find the correct path. For all of the supposed distinctions between Lenin and Luxemburg—Lenin believing that the proletariat had to be led to class consciousness by the party, Luxemburg never neglecting the role of leadership, but giving far greater weight to the natural generation of class consciousness from the life world of the proletariat—their ideas meet on the plane of historical determinism. No less than Lenin's, Luxemburg's position opened

Quoted in Abraham, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 144. *Die Rote Fahne* collected many of these attacks in an article on the anniversary of her and Liebknecht's assassination: "Nie Vergessen! Die Bluthetze des 'Vorwärts' und der bürgerlichen Presse gegen Karl Liebknecht und Rosa Luxemburg in den Januartagen 1919," *RF*, 15 January 1933.

40. The concluding chapters of Nettel's *Rosa Luxemburg*, with their depiction of her personal and political commitments in the last months of her life, are still valuable and quite moving.

41. See the comments at the KPD's founding congress, e.g. Luxemburg:

Our next task is to instruct the masses, in order to fulfill these tasks [of the revolution] . . . I say to you that it is thanks to the immaturity of the masses, who until now have not understood the importance of bringing the council system to victory, that the counterrevolution has succeeded in constructing the Constitutional Assembly as a bulwark against us. Weber, ed., *Gründungsparteitag*, 101.

Liebknecht:

. . . presently the great majority of the proletariat is not yet thoroughly educated in a revolutionary way. We are then compelled to use all means to win over and to enlighten the masses. *Ibid.*, 126.

the way for the party to substitute itself for the working class, leading, in the case of the KPD/SED, to a politics that became ever more detached from careful analysis of existing conditions.

Moreover, the expectation that proletariat political power and socialization of the means of production would resolve all social conflicts, creating unlimited prosperity, elided all sorts of problems: of forms of oppression that were not, or only partly, class-based, such as of gender or of race; of the institutional grounding of the polity and the economy; of the relationship between civil society and the state. Clearly, Luxemburg imbibed that nineteenth-century materialism that subsumed all issues to property relations. By offering no intermediate political goals whatsoever, by directing everything *auf das Ganze*, Luxemburg left no room for a more mundane politics of everyday life. She obliterated the intermediate aspects of political life—the public sphere as a mediating arena between state and society—and social groups between the revolutionary proletariat and the counterrevolutionary capitalists and their allies. Her own democratic beliefs were undermined by the deterministic leap of faith in socialism and in the proletariat as historical agent, and by her understanding of politics as instrument, as a way of building a society whose outlines, if not details, are already known. A notion of democracy as rational discourse in the public sphere designed to arrive at the common, as yet undefined, good, a democratic politics involving democratic procedures *and* a certain open-endedness in relation to goals, was the furthest thing from her mind.⁴² Her own rhetoric could be so provocative as to sound very much like the promotion of proletarian terror, a prospect made only more likely by her failure adequately to anchor democratic institutions. It was the last sentence of the party program—“Daumen aufs Auge und Knie auf die Brust! [Thumb on the eye and knee on the chest]”—that was reproduced so often in the KPD press, contributing to the political culture of violence that the party cultivated in the Weimar Republic, and to the political intransigence of the party-state in the German Democratic Republic.

42. I am drawing here on recent discussions concerning the interrelated notions of the public sphere and civil society, many of which proceed from Jürgen Habermas's classic work, recently translated into English as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, 1989). See also Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 1992); Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge, 1992); Seyla Benhabib, “Autonomy, Modernity, and Community: Communitarianism and Critical Social Theory in Dialogue,” and Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, “Politics and the Reconstruction of the Concept of Civil Society,” both in Axel Honneth, et al., eds., *Cultural-Political Interventions in the Unfinished Project of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1992), 39–59 and 121–42.

Constructing the Luxemburg Legacy in the KPD/SED

Luxemburg's political and intellectual legacy entails, then, far more than the democratic views for which she is most remembered. Her politics were also defined by an uncritical evocation of the power of mass activism; an unyielding commitment to a politics of totality; consequently, the denigration of every kind of limited politics, of any politics that substantively focused on everyday concerns and that, tactically, centered around political alliances; and, finally, a commitment to central power in the guise of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Each of these points intersected with Lenin's views, at least those of the "classical" period of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917–21. Progressively shorn of the democratic content with which they were endowed by Luxemburg, they were incorporated into the politics of German communism.

Certainly, Luxemburg's legacy was greatly contested in the KPD and the Comintern, and subsequently in the SED. The conflicts began almost immediately with Paul Levi's publication in 1922 of her pamphlet, "The Russian Revolution." Some of her oldest allies and friends were marshalled into the service of defending her commitment to the Bolshevik Revolution against Levi's efforts to depict her as its fiery critic.⁴³ In the GDR, Wilhelm Pieck and many others repeated Clara Zetkin's argument of 1922, that Luxemburg had begun to revise her views in the last months of her life and was well on the road to Leninism at the time of her assassination.⁴⁴ In the process, they eviscerated her criticisms of the Russian Revolution. In the 1920s and 1930s she was often appropriated for the factional conflicts in ways that did violence to the tenor of her views.⁴⁵

While some sought to preserve her for the Comintern, others believed revolutionary politics could only be made by driving Luxemburg from the communist partheon. Ruth Fischer, KPD leader in 1924 and early 1925, issued a number of highly charged, even vicious, criticisms of

43. See especially Clara Zetkin, *Um Rosa Luxemburgs Stellung zur russischen Revolution* (Hamburg, 1922) and Adolf Warski, *Rosa Luxemburgs Stellung zu den taktischen Problemen der Revolution* (Berlin, 1922). Feliks Tych has recently published three unknown letters of Luxemburg's from the Central Party Archive of the Institute for Marxism-Leninism (since renamed) in Moscow, which clearly demonstrate that Luxemburg stood by her critique of the Bolshevik Revolution and that she intended to publish her pamphlet. See Feliks Tych, "Drei unbekannte Briefe Rosa Luxemburgs über die Oktoberrevolution," *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* 27 no. 3 (September 1991): 357–66.

44. Wilhelm Pieck, "Vorwort," in Rosa Luxemburg, *Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften*, 2 vols., ed. Marx-Engels-Lenin-Institut beim ZK der SED (Berlin, 1951), 6–7.

45. For just two examples in which she was marshalled in defense of the party leadership against the "right" and the "reconcilers" and in support of the intransigent politics of the Comintern's "third period," see "Der 15. Januar," *RF*, 15 January 1929, 2, and "Von Spartakus zum Bolschewismus," *RF*, 15 January 1930.

Luxemburg.⁴⁶ By the mid-1920s, the standard communist critique of her, reiterated until the very end of the GDR in 1989/90, was already in place. Luxemburg, it was claimed, had kept the Spartacists for too long within the confines of social democracy, did not recognize the importance of the “party of a new type,” dangerously exaggerated the potency of “spontaneity,” failed to recognize the revolutionary force of the peasantry, and erred theoretically on the national question and on the crisis mechanism of capitalism.⁴⁷ Stalin gave forceful expression to this view in 1931 with his blanket condemnation of the prewar SPD LEFT, Luxemburg in particular, and its “Menshevik errors.”⁴⁸ His intervention was soon followed by still more vicious attacks by various KPD and Comintern spokesmen. Stalin’s article was then republished many times in the party and Comintern press, and in the early years of the GDR.⁴⁹

But Luxemburg was not only silenced or misappropriated in the service of party and state. Her ideas and language also lent themselves to mobilization by a party and movement committed to a strategy, in the Weimar Republic, of revolutionary militancy and, in the German Democratic Republic, of the absolute demarcation of state socialism from liberal capitalism—a strategy that reverberated with pronounced masculine, militaristic, and intransigent tones.⁵⁰ Luxemburg became a preeminent symbol of revolutionary commitment, the martyred leader who, whatever her theoretical weaknesses, died in the cause of the socialist future. At the same time, the binary oppositions that infused her writings and speeches—between revolution and reform, socialism and capitalism, revolutionaries and traitors—contributed to the formation of the language and ideology of German communism. Through the cultural practices of the party and

46. Ruth Fischer compared “Luxemburgism” with a “Syphilisbazillus,” quoted in Weber, *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus*, 1:90.

47. For just a few examples: Fritz Heckert, “Zum zehnten Jahrestag unserer Partei,” *RF*, 30 December 1928; “Von Spartakus zum Bolschewismus,” *RF*, 15 January 1930; Fritz Heckert, “Der 15. Januar 1919: Zum dreizehnten Todestag von Karl Liebknecht und Rosa Luxemburg,” *Inprekorr* 3 (1932): 66–67, a particularly unrelenting and mendacious attack; “Der Leninismus und die Linken in der Vorkriegssozialdemokratie,” *RF*, 15 January 1933. For a summary and an analysis of the attempt to identify “Trotskyism” and “Luxemburgism,” see Weber, *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus*, 1:89–97.

48. Josef V. Stalin, “Zu einigen Fragen der Geschichte des Bolschewismus,” *RF*, 22 November 1931.

49. For examples: N. Popow, “Die Idealisierung des Luxemburgismus ist die Fahne unserer Feinde,” *Inprekorr* 117 (1931): 2677–79, a particularly unrelenting critique; “Die historischen Erfahrungen des Bolschewismus und das internationale Proletariat: (Zu der L.L.L.-Kampagne im Januar),” *Inprekorr* 120 (1931): 2785–87; and Luxemburg, *Ausgewählte Reden*. The first one hundred or so pages of this GDR edition of Luxemburg’s work consist of Stalin’s article and other critiques of Luxemburg by Lenin. For a discussion, see Erwin Lewin, “Einige Aspekte der Wirkung von Stalins Luxemburg-Urteil 1931 in der Komintern,” *BzG* 33 no. 4 (1919): 483–93.

50. On the historical formation of the party’s strategy in the Weimar period, see

an array of media, these meanings were conveyed to party members and, in the GDR, to the citizenry of the socialist state. Ultimately, these meanings helped to limit the possibilities for new political departures in the GDR, at the same time that Luxemburg's democratic sensibilities provided the opposition with powerful intellectual weaponry against the party-state.

Especially the annual commemoration of her (and Liebknecht's) assassination inscribed Luxemburg's legacy into the political and social life of party members in the 1920s, early 1930s, and 1940s, and of the GDR citizenry between 1949 and 1989. These festivals provided the primary occasion for memorializing Luxemburg, the moment when leaders offered testaments to her great revolutionary role, the press published excerpts from her writings, and the party membership and the population at large were drawn into a sacred public ritual that consecrated the militant activism and conscientious socialist labor of the party's founding leaders and the succeeding generations.⁵¹ In this way, Luxemburg's legacy could then be used to lend legitimacy to party strategies and state policies and, ultimately in the GDR, to the national identity of the socialist state and its citizenry.

These early festivals began immediately after the assassination of Luxemburg and Liebknecht on 15 January 1919. Ten days later, on 25 January 1919, tens of thousands of Berlin workers, the largest gathering Berlin had ever seen, marched to Friedrichsfelde to bury Liebknecht and an empty coffin for Luxemburg, whose body had not yet been found. Late that spring, on

Eric D. Weitz, "State Power, Class Fragmentation, and the Shaping of German Communist Politics, 1890–1933," *Journal of Modern History* 62 no. 2 (June 1990): 253–97. For a discussion of the intersections between party strategies and conceptions of gender, see Eric D. Weitz, *Popular Communism: Political Strategies and Social Histories in the Formation of the German, French, and Italian Communist Parties, 1919–1948*, Cornell University Western Societies Program Occasional Paper no. 31 (Ithaca, 1992). Specifically on the gendered nature of communism in the Weimar Republic, see Silvia Kontos, "*Die Partei kämpft wie ein Mann*": *Frauenpolitik der KPD in der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt am Main, 1979). On the GDR see, most recently, Gisela Helwig and Hildegard Maria Nickel, eds., *Frauen in Deutschland 1945–1992* (Berlin, 1993). Weber, in *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus*, 1:97, sees only the condemnations of Luxemburg, not how her legacy was mobilized effectively by the party.

51. Amid a very large literature on rituals and, in particular, demonstrations, I have found especially useful Temma Kaplan, *Red City, Blue Period: Social Movements in Picasso's Barcelona* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1992); Mary Ryan, "Gender and Public Access: Women's Politics in Nineteenth-Century America," in Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 259–88; Mary Ryan, "The American Parade: Representations of the Nineteenth-Century Social Order," in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989), 131–53; and David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven, 1988).

52. See the account "'Unser Schiff zieht seinen geraden Kurs fest und stolz dahin bis Zum Ziel': Impressionen am Wege unserer traditionellen Demonstration zur Gedenkstätte der Sozialisten in Berlin-Friedrichsfelde," *Neues Deutschland* (hereafter *ND*), 10/11 January 1987, 9.

13 June 1919, after her body had turned up in a canal, working-class Berlin reenacted the march and gave Luxemburg a proper burial.⁵² The ritual marches to the gravesite in 1919 reproduced a long-standing tradition of funereal demonstrations in which the popular classes memorialized their leaders or the victims of repression and states and political parties sought to solidify their power or influence.⁵³

The young KPD soon formalized these commemorations, and with Lenin's death, also in January, they became the so-called LLL (Lenin-Liebknrecht-Luxemburg) festivals.⁵⁴ In Berlin, the LLL commemorations always included a march from the Frankfurter Allee to the gravesite at Friedrichsfelde where, along with Liebknrecht and Luxemburg, other socialist militants were buried. The march, a fixed feature of Berlin politics in the Weimar period, was resumed after World War II and maintained down to the very end of the German Democratic Republic, when the party press reported a regular attendance of some 200,000 people. Outside of Berlin, local party organizations conducted their own commemorations. In Halle-Merseburg, for example, one of the KPD's most important areas, the district leadership reported to the Central Committee that 44 LLL-festivals in 1927, 45 in 1928, had taken place, and that they had attracted wide participation.⁵⁵ In January 1946, the revived district organization reported that celebrations had been held jointly with the SPD in all the subdistricts of Halle-Merseburg, and that many were well attended.⁵⁶

53. See for example Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1988), 61–82, which has some scattered discussions of funerals; the oft-repeated story of Victor Hugo's grand funeral in 1885, which purportedly helped solidify the Third Republic, in Hubert Juin, *Victor Hugo*, vol. 3: *1870–1885* (Paris, 1986), 307–26; and August Bebel's great funeral in Zürich as reported in *Vorwärts*, 17 August 1913 ("Der stille Bebel") and 18 August 1913 ("Bebels Leichenbegängnis"). Bebel's funeral, like Hugo's, was a well-organized affair, with dignitaries from the SPD and the Second International well in attendance. But the great popular outpouring, again like Hugo's, added another dimension. The *Vorwärts* reports played up both elements to demonstrate the great stature of the SPD and the internationalism of the socialist movement. The party press also drew an interesting contrast between Zürich and Berlin. It noted the multiclass character of the mourners in Zürich, but expected an exclusively proletarian demonstration in Berlin given the reactionary and militaristic character of the other classes in the Prussian and German capital.

54. The order of the names was not merely alphabetical, but reflected the evaluation of the importance of each of the leaders, as propaganda directives to the party districts in late 1932 advised: "There cannot be a shred of doubt that Lenin stands ahead of Luxemburg and Liebknrecht." Agitprop Abteilung des ZK der KPD, "Lenin, Liebknrecht, Luxemburg: Rede-Dispositionen für LLL-Feiern und -Kundgebungen 1933," Bundesarchiv Koblenz R45 IV/39, Bl. 196ff., here Bl. 5 of pamphlet.

55. Bezirksleitung der KPD Halle-Merseburg, "Politischer Bericht des Bezirks Halle-Merseburg für die Monate Dezember 1926-Januar 1927," IGA, ZPA I 3/11/16, Bl. 52–64, quote Bl. 62; Bezirksleitung des KPD Sekretariats, "Politischer Bericht des Bezirks Halle-Merseburg für die Monate November und Dezember 1927 und Januar 1928," IGA, ZPA I 3/11/16, Bl. 101–25, here Bl. 115–16.

56. See "Monatsbericht für Januar der Unterbezirksleitung der KPD Halle-Merseburg,"

In the LLL-festivals, the KPD and SED invoked Luxemburg's unconditional commitment to an activist, revolutionary politics. *Die Rote Fahne's* commemoration of Luxemburg in conjunction with the 1933 anniversary of the assassination resonated with Luxemburg's inflamed rhetoric and revolutionary ideas.

... six million Communists hold the flag high, which at that time fell from the hands of Luxemburg and Liebknecht. Six million Communists stand armed in the spirit of Liebknecht and Luxemburg and with the weapons of victorious Leninism to struggle for a socialist Germany... In the middle of a world ignited by the fire of war, in the middle of the cacophony of arms of the reactionary powers, in the center of capitalist rule in fascist Germany—today resounds the clear call of the proletariat, the call of the Germany of workers and peasants: With Luxemburg and Liebknecht—We are on the attack!⁵⁷

By staking out the offensive, by going “on the attack,” the KPD of the Weimar Republic reprised Luxemburg's efforts to raise continually the revolutionary temper. It proved a simple task to cull quotes from her speeches and writings that echoed *Die Rote Fahne's* own inflamed tones, and that made commitment to revolutionary politics the essential criterion of socialist militancy.

Moreover, the street battles of the Weimar Republic seemed like the confirmation in practice of Luxemburg's overwrought rhetoric and celebration of the streets as the essential space of political engagement. *Die Rote Fahne* concluded one report of the LLL demonstration with a depiction of a street fight between communist demonstrators and “cocky and provocative” SA men, whom the crowd beat into retreat.⁵⁸ In the march to the gravesite, the prominent role of the KPD's paramilitary organization of the 1920s, the Red Front Fighters Association, and of the workplace-based, paramilitary “*Kampfgruppen*” of the GDR, gave visual representation to the militancy of the socialist struggle. Disseminated through the party press and, in the GDR, through televised portrayals, these visual representations of idealized revolutionaries as physically powerful men marching in disciplined formation echoed Luxemburg's own gendered language, which identified pronounced revolutionary politics with masculinity.⁵⁹

Landesverband Sachsen-Anhalt der PDS, Landesparteiarchiv Halle (hereafter LPAH) 1/2/3/3, Bl. 36; 1. Bezirksleitung der KPD—Provinz Sachsen, 2. Unterbezirksleitung der KPD—Halle-Merseburg, “Monatsbericht Januar,” 2 February 1946, LPAH 1/2/3/3a, Bl. 25; “Tätigkeitsbericht der Kommunistischen Partei, Kreisleitung Zeitz, für den Monat Februar 1946,” LPAH 1/2/3/3a Bl. 176.

57. “In ihrem Geiste vorwärts! Auf nach Friedrichsfelde!” *RF*, 15 January 1933.

58. “So ehrte das rote Berlin seine Toten!” *RF*, 17 January 1933.

59. As late as the 1980s, *Neues Deutschland's* report on the demonstration accorded

Luxemburg's bipolar concept of politics as a struggle between revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries, with Social Democrats prominent among the latter, seemed perfectly incarnated in the social and political conflicts of the Weimar Republic, and then in the hostilities of the Cold War. With little difficulty, the editors of *Die Rote Fahne* in 1933 assembled quotations from Luxemburg and Liebknecht under the headline, "Forever indicted! Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg lash out at the social democratic leaders."⁶⁰ Similarly, it was a rather easy matter for the editors of *Neues Deutschland* to condemn in 1949 the SPD and its "revisionist swamp" by summoning up Luxemburg's role in the revisionist debates of the pre-World War I Second International and her attacks on the SPD government in 1918/19.⁶¹ In the midst of the Cold War the list of enemies expanded to include the Federal Republic and the United States, which, like the bourgeoisie and imperialists of Weimar, served as the lord protectors of the SPD. Luxemburg's attacks on the SPD were often repeated, with Kurt Schumacher and Erich Ollenhauer standing in for Friedrich Ebert and Philipp Scheidemann. The legacy of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, Pieck argued at the 1950 commemoration, "calls us to struggle against the remilitarization of West Germany, against the reestablishment of Prussian-German militarism, in the pay of the Anglo-Americans." Driving the point home, Pieck compared the attacks on the GDR levelled by Schumacher and Ollenhauer with the murderers of Liebknecht and Luxemburg:

The lack of scruples and the mendacity of their agitation against the German Democratic Republic does not differ in the slightest from that of those who promoted the same agitation against Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. With this agitation they contributed to the assassination of the two most brave and true leaders of the German proletariat. But they could not prevent what Karl Liebknecht predicted in his last famous article, "Trotz alledem!": "You are already defeated!"⁶²

prominent place to the parade of the *Kampfgruppen*. See *ND*, 14 January 1980, and the photos of the all male *Kampfgruppen* accompanying the reports in *ND*, 18 January 1988, 3 and 16 January 1989, 3. In terms of Luxemburg's gendered language, see the previously-cited quote in which she accused the USPD of lacking "manly resolve." (n. 29) Note also the oft-repeated story in which Luxemburg and Bebel converse about her and Clara Zetkin's epitaph. As rendered in von Trotta's film:

Bebel: "Here lie two honorable, courageous women, whose untiring struggle for . . ." Luxemburg: Why not simply: "Here lie the last two men of German social democracy."

(Thanks to Rick McCormick of the University of Minnesota's German Department for the exact wording of the screenplay.)

60. *RF*, 15 January 1933.

61. "Den Toten die Ehre—uns die Pflicht," *ND*, 16 January 1949, 3.

62. Wilhelm Pieck, "Wir erfüllen das Vermächtnis unserer Toten," *ND*, 15 January 1950, 3.

While the virulence of the attacks eased a bit in the later years of the GDR, the SED retained its essential hostility to the SPD until the very end. The memorials to Luxemburg and Liebknecht, and the use of Luxemburg's own language, served as constant reminders of the calumny of social democracy, and of the division of the world into two unalterably opposed camps.⁶³

Strikingly, Luxemburg's legacy waned in significance between 1945 and 1948, the only significant period of moderation in the party's history. Her (and Lenin's) unwavering commitment to revolution and unceasing hostility toward social democracy had little place at a time when the party, under Soviet sponsorship, advocated a "German road to socialism," which implied a relatively long-term transitional phase between capitalism and socialism; alliances with non-proletarian groups; and unity with social democracy. The Lenin-Luxemburg-Liebknecht commemorations were revived, but the utter confusion about what to call them is indicative of Luxemburg's problematic legacy in this period. Party documents variously labelled the first commemorations in 1946 "Luxemburg-Lenin," "Liebknecht-Luxemburg," or, occasionally, the traditional "Lenin-Liebknecht-Luxemburg" festivals.⁶⁴ The two founders of German communism were depicted in this period in a mostly symbolic fashion, as the heroic martyrs for socialism, as "unforgettable fighters for peace and democracy," not for revolution. Also, in the more open politics of the immediate postwar years, the party press invoked Luxemburg as a creative thinker who did not view Marxism as dogma, and whose legacy was evident in the party's efforts to forge a democratic, peaceful path toward socialism. Her humanism was cited, often by quoting from some of the more lyrical passages of her prison letters.⁶⁵

63. See Peter Lübke, "Wandelt sich das 'sozialreformistische' Feindbild in der DDR?" *Deutschland Archiv* 21 no. 11 (November 1988): 1178–88, who analyzes SED attitudes toward the SPD in light of the agreement on disarmament signed between the two parties in 1987. In a rather unimaginative exercise, Lübke has little difficulty putting together a string of quotations demonstrating the SED's continued hostility toward social democracy.

64. "Monatsbericht für Januar der Unterbezirksleitung der KPD Halle-Merseburg," LPAH 1/2/3/3, Bl. 36; 1. Bezirksleitung der KPD—Provinz Sachsen, 2. Unterbezirksleitung der KPD—Halle-Merseburg, "Monatsbericht Januar," 2 February 1946, LPAH 1/2/3/3a, Bl. 25; "Tätigkeitsbericht der Kommunistischen Partei, Kreisleitung Zeitz, für den Monat Februar 1946," LPAH 1/2/3/3a Bl. 176. In Erwin Könnemann, et al., *Vereint auf dem Weg zum Sozialismus: Geschichte der Landesparteiorganisation Sachsen-Anhalt der SED 1945 bis 1952*, ed. Bezirksleitungen Halle und Magdeburg der SED (Halle, 1986), 194, the commemoration is given its old triple name, but I take this as a retrospective levelling of the history.

65. See Wilhelm Pieck, "Ich war—ich bin—ich werde sein: Rosa Luxemburg und Karl Liebknecht," and Frida Rubiner, "In Memoriam Rosa Luxemburg," in *ND*, 15 January 1947, 3; "Unvergessene Kämpfer für Frieden und Demokratie," with photographs of Liebknecht and Luxemburg and a call to the traditional January demonstration, *ND*, 15 January 1948; "Kämpferin für Recht und Menschlichkeit: Rosa Luxemburg in ihren Briefen,"

More typically, the KPD/SED memorialized the martyrdom of Liebknecht and Luxemburg to inspire party supporters to still greater exertions on behalf of the party, the party-state, and the socialist cause. As one report from the Weimar period trumpeted:

... Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht fell in the struggle for the proletarian dictatorship. The German working class will fulfill the living legacy of their dead leaders in the struggle for the proletarian dictatorship!⁶⁶

In the days just before the tenth anniversary of the assassination of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, *Die Rote Fahne* published a series of tributes under the dramatic headline, "They are still not avenged!"⁶⁷ The lead article, with pictures of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, admonished party members, "Forward in the spirit of our pioneers [*Vorkämpfer*]." ⁶⁸ As late as 1933, almost one and one-half years after Stalin's condemnation of her and just before the Nazi rise to power, *Die Rote Fahne* again lionized Luxemburg's contributions to the revolutionary cause with an article commemorating the assassinations, complete with a drawing on the front page of Lenin, Liebknecht, and Luxemburg peacefully laid out in their coffins and the headline "Forward in their spirit!" (Figure 1)⁶⁹ Such representations, often coupled with excerpts from her writings under such headlines as "Writings of Rosa Luxemburg that every worker should know,"⁷⁰ connected Luxemburg's politics of totality with the party's claim to embody "true" socialist politics—however much in other respects the party diverged dramatically from her conception of socialism.

Withstanding the January cold and rain to march in honor of Liebknecht and Luxemburg underscored the determination and commitment of the party's followers, just as Luxemburg and Liebknecht had been unwavering in their commitment to socialism. As the party daily reported just two weeks before the Nazi *Machtergreifung* radically altered the fortunes of German communism:

Red Berlin marched to the graves of Karl and Rosa . . .

Many times we saw one person give another his gloves, a youth drape

ND, 15 January 1948, 3; Käte Duncker, "Erinnerungen an Rosa Luxemburg," ND, 15 January 1949, 3; "Den Toten die Ehre—uns die Pflicht," ND, 16 January 1949, 3.

66. "Von Spartakus zum Bolschewismus," RF, 15 January 1930.

67. RF, 13 January 1929. The KPD used the occasion to launch yet another attack on social democracy.

68. RF, 13 January 1929.

69. RF, 15 January 1933. Or as another oft-quoted slogan used to inspire party members went: "Honor to the dead, responsibility to us." See "Den Toten die Ehre—uns die Pflicht," ND, 16 January 1949, 3.

70. RF, 15 January 1930.



FIGURE 1: The KPD's “Lenin-Liebknecht-Luxemburg Festival” in the Weimar Republic. The three heroic leaders lie peacefully in their coffins as the powerful force of the Soviet Union ignites communism around the world. Germany, with six million communist voters, is already partly inflamed.
 Source: *Die Rote Fahne*, 15 January 1933.

his coat on an old comrade marching next to him, or vice versa. The Workers Music Group provided the march beat, and most of them played with bare hands. The fingers of the pipers became stiff, but they played anyway. With uncountable banners the columns marched on, from the north, the east, the south, the west, underway for miles and hours. The unemployed without breakfast, without coats, freezing inside and out, streamed together to the three meeting places.⁷¹

Neues Deutschland later depicted crowds dressed for the winter and marching under a sea of umbrellas and giant posters of Liebknecht and Luxemburg, fighting the elements to honor the revolutionary martyrs. (Figure 2)⁷² Similarly, the famous line from Luxemburg's last article, "Ich war—ich bin—ich werde sein [I was—I am—I shall be]," displayed on banners carried by demonstrators and at the monument to socialist militants at Friedrichsfelde, linked Luxemburg's unwavering commitment to the socialist cause with the current generation of party members working to develop still further the socialist state.⁷³

The militancy of the party and the party-state was inextricably entwined with its internationalist commitments, and here also Luxemburg's politics and persona lent themselves to mobilization. Her own biography was often cited as a model of internationalism, and of German-Polish friendship in particular (little mention was made of her Jewish background).⁷⁴ The festivals commemorating her assassination provided visible evidence of militant internationalism. *Die Rote Fahne* described the 1933 commemoration in terms that reaffirmed commitment to the Soviet Union and to the larger universe of proletarian struggle:

Proletarians, when you march today, know that all of working-class Germany, the entire proletarian world, marches with you in spirit to the graves in Friedrichsfelde! Know that the names of Liebknecht and Luxemburg inflame millions of Russian workers in the construction of socialism! Know that the names Liebknecht and Luxemburg are holy to the last coolie of Shanghai and are honored in the immense provinces of China where the impoverished peasants have overthrown the yoke of the landlords and have established soviet power! There, where Karl and Rosa lie side by side with many brave Berlin workers, the victims of white officers, the victims of the murderous SA, the victims

71. "So ehrte das rote Berlin seine Toten!" *RF*, 17 January 1933. For days beforehand, the party press carried instructions about where to meet and the march route.

72. "Mit der Stärkung unserer Republik erfüllen wir ihr revolutionäres Vermächtnis: Rede von Egon Krenz in der Gedenkstätte der Sozialisten," *ND*, 18 January 1988, 3, and "Aufmarsch von über 200 000 Berlinern an den Gräbern von Karl und Rosa," *ND*, 18 January 1988, 1, 3.

73. For example, "Ich war—ich bin—ich werde sein," *ND*, 18 January 1949, 1–2.

74. As in "Rosa Luxemburg—Symbol deutsch-polnischer Verbundenheit," *ND*, 15 January 1950, 3.



FIGURE 2: Fighting the elements to commemorate Luxemburg and Liebknecht. Demonstrators brave the cold and rain to recommit themselves to socialism and to the SED's historical legacy. The banner on the left reads: "With new deeds for the strengthening of socialism!" The caption reads: "Portraits of Karl and Rosa yet again in kilometer-long demonstration columns through the streets of the capital."

Source: *Neues Deutschland*, 18 January 1988.

of Zorgiebel and Grzesinski [respectively, the social democratic police president of Berlin and Prussian minister of the interior—there march today men and women and youth of Berlin, communists and social democratic and unaffiliated workers, who swear to be worthy of the fallen proletarian heroes!]⁷⁵

After World War II, delegations from other communist countries and the Soviet military command participated prominently in the demonstrations.⁷⁶ All the gatherings involved the singing of socialist and communist songs—“The Internationale,” of course, “Dem Morgenrot entgegen,” as well as, subsequently, “Die Thälmann-Kolonne” (from the German International Brigade), and the GDR’s national anthem.

Finally, the memorialization of Luxemburg served also to establish the historical legitimacy of the party, and of the party-state in the post-World War II world.⁷⁷ Even Ernst Thälmann, faithful Stalinist that he was, invoked the powerful meaning of Liebknecht and Luxemburg for the KPD some months after Stalin had disabused Communists of such views:

We have no intention of diminishing the importance of Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Franz Mehring, and the other comrades who formed the left radical wing of prewar social democracy. We have no intention of denying the true revolutionary character of these fighters and leaders, or of denying their solid revolutionary traditions. And we certainly do not want to leave them to the social fascists, SAPers, or Brandlerers [the latter two smaller left-wing organizations composed mainly of ex-Communists and ex-Social Democrats], who defame the dead. Rosa Luxemburg and the others belong to us, belong to the Communist International and the KPD, on whose founding they contributed.⁷⁸

75. “In ihrem Geiste vorwärts! Auf nach Friedrichsfelde!” *RF*, 15 January 1933.

76. In 1950, for example, shortly after the victory of the Chinese Communist party, *Neues Deutschland* featured prominently a Chinese female partisan. See *ND*, 17 January 1950, photograph 1 and “Das befreite China grüsst die grossen Toten: Die Ansprache der chinesischen Partisanin Wang Wu An,” 2.

77. For a profound discussion of the efforts to create legitimacy in the GDR, see Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft in der DDR: Zum Paradox von Stabilität und Revolution in der DDR 1945–1989* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992). For other examples of the party’s use of history to construct its legitimacy, see the Central Committee’s theses for the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the KPD, “70 Jahre Kampf für Sozialismus und Frieden, für das Wohl des Volkes: Thesen des Zentralkomitees der SED zum 70. Jahrestag der Gründung der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschlands,” *ND*, 14 June 1988, 3–8, and the *Geschichte der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED (Berlin, 1988), the first volume of which, some 850 pages long, carries the story only from the 1840s to 1917, i.e., even prior to the founding of the KPD! The Revolution of 1989/90 ended the prospects for the publication of the subsequent three volumes. For interesting commentary on the Central Committee’s theses, see Hermann Weber, “Geschichte als Instrument der Politik: Zu den Thesen de ZK der SED ‘Zum 70. Jahrestag der Gründung der KPD,’” *Deutschland Archiv* 21 no. 8 (August 1988): 863–72. Weber sees the theses as an effort to hold the line against Gorbachev’s reform policies.

78. Thälmann at a meeting of the Central Committee in February 1932, quoted in,

In 1951, Wilhelm Pieck condensed Thälmann's words and concluded a tribute to her with the slogan, "Rosa Luxemburg Belongs to Us!"⁷⁹ He called hers "a life in the service of German working people" one that was "precious [teuer]" to all Marxists. Pieck's 1951 tribute to Luxemburg carried a photograph of Ernst Thälmann's daughter gazing at a plaque on the building where Luxemburg spent part of her prison term during World War I. Thälmann's daughter is shown reading the inscription:

Here, in the year 1916, Rosa Luxemburg was held and imprisoned because she struggled for socialism and peace. (Figure 3)⁸⁰

This not very subtle representation served to establish the revolutionary lineage from the founding of the party, through the KPD of the Weimar Republic, and on into the SED-state. Similarly, the publication of many of Luxemburg's writings in both Weimar and the GDR, culminating in the release in the 1970s and 1980s of her collected works—including "The Russian Revolution"—and collected letters, underscored her significance for the party's construction of its own historical legacy.⁸¹

At the commemorations, marchers carried huge portraits of Luxemburg and Liebknecht. Phrases like "We are fulfilling the legacy of our fallen leaders!" showered the marchers in both the Weimar and post-World War II years, and were spread to the party's followers through newspaper

"In ihrem Namen . . . , *RF*, 15 January 1933, 2. Thälmann did go on, however, to reiterate the standard criticisms of Luxemburg.

79. Wilhelm Pieck, "Das revolutionäre Erbe Rosa Luxemburgs und die deutsche Arbeiterbewegung," *ND*, 4 March 1951. The occasion for this tribute was Luxemburg's birthday, not her assassination. Thälmann's actual words, as cited above, were: "Rosa Luxemburg und die anderen gehören zu uns . . ." ("In ihrem Namen . . . , " *RF*, 15 January 1933, 2) See also Pieck, "Vorwort," in Luxemburg, *Ausgewählte Reden*. While the SED's official "Thesen zum 35. Jahrestag der Gründung der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschlands (1918–1953)," tended to slight Luxemburg's role, even Fred Oelssner, the SED's leading ideologist at the time and author of a rather scurrilous biography of Luxemburg, felt compelled to remind readers that Luxemburg was

one of the most significant personalities of the European labor movement . . . A sharp-witted theoretician and writer of Marxism . . . a virulent enemy of opportunism, a helpful friend, always at the ready, of the exploited and oppressed, an unwearied agitator—that was Rosa Luxemburg . . .

Rosa Luxemburg is especially precious to the German proletariat . . . The young generation of socialist fighters of course recognizes the name of this outstanding leader of workers, but not her life and work. It is therefore an urgent responsibility to develop this knowledge among the masses.

For the official theses see *Zur Geschichte der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschlands: Eine Auswahl von Materialien und Dokumenten aus den Jahren 1914–1946*, 2nd. ed., ed. Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin-Institut beim ZK der SED (Berlin, 1955), 444–62 and for Oelssner's biography, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 6–7. Weber, in "Die SED und Rosa Luxemburg," 154–55, mentions only the vituperation directed against Luxemburg and "Luxemburgism" in Pieck's and Oelssner's writings and speeches in the 1950s.

80. Pieck, "Das revolutionäre Erbe."

81. See n. 1.



FIGURE 3: Creating the historical lineage of the party. Ernst Thälmann's daughter laying a wreath by the memorial plaque where Luxemburg spent part of her prison sentence in World War I. The plaque reads: "Here Rosa Luxemburg was imprisoned and held in 1916 because she struggled for socialism and peace."

Source: *Neues Deutschland*, 4 March 1951.

and, subsequently, television reports. Honored delegations—Spartacus Group members; other party veterans, some of whom recalled the demonstrations of the 1920s or whose parents had talked to them about Karl and Rosa; veterans of the Spanish Civil War; victims of fascism—invoked the heroic past of the party and, by extension, the deeply sunk historical roots of the SED and GDR.⁸² Typically, Central Committee member Hermann Axen proclaimed in 1987: “Our GDR has realized the great legacy of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg.”⁸³

The establishment of the historical lineage of the party also confirmed the role of the existing leaderships, and linked leaders and followers. Ernst Thälmann, Walter Ulbricht, and Wilhelm Pieck, Erich Honecker—each in turn led the marches from the Frankfurter Allee to Friedrichsfelde. In the ultimate consecration of leaders and led, *Die Rote Fahne* reported the response to Wilhelm Pieck at the 1933 commemoration:

In front of the speakers’ stand beamed the white head of our comrade Wilhelm Pieck. The Red Front cry roared out. Everyone greeted the comrade of Karl and Rosa. Everyone raised their fists and joined in the commitment to fulfill the work of our great departed ones . . .⁸⁴

By the 1950s, *Neues Deutschland* reports had to list every member of the Politburo and the State Council who followed Ulbricht or Honecker to the gravesite.⁸⁵ The photographs accompanying the reports of the demonstrations of the last years of the GDR show a beaming Erich Honecker waving to the crowds and giving the clenched fist salute—the modern leader of a modern state and the old party militant all in one. (Figure 4)⁸⁶

82. For these examples see: “Schon seit Jahrzehnten in Friedrichsfelde dabei,” *ND*, 14 January 1980, 2; “Im Geiste von Karl und Rosa alle Kraft für Sozialismus und Frieden: ‘Unser Schiff zieht seinen geraden Kurs fest und stolz dahin bis zum Ziel,’” *ND*, 10/11 January 1987, 9; “Massenaufmarsch für Sozialismus und Frieden: Über 200 000 Berliner an den Gräbern von Karl und Rosa,” *ND*, 12 January 1987, 1, 3; “Machtvolle Demonstration für Sozialismus und Frieden: Aufmarsch von über 200 000 Berlinern an den Gräbern von Karl und Rosa,” *ND*, 18 January 1988, 1, 3.

83. “DDR—ein Eckpfeiler von Frieden und Sozialismus im Herzen Europas: Rede von Hermann Axen in der Gedenkstätte der Sozialisten,” *ND*, 12 January 1987, 3. For an earlier example, “Die Gedächtnisrede in der Staatsoper,” *ND*, 16 January 1949, 4.

84. “So ehrte das rote Berlin seine Toten!” *RF*, 17 January 1933.

85. For the more recent examples, see: “Massenaufmarsch für Sozialismus und Frieden: Über 200 000 Berliner an den Gräbern von Karl und Rosa,” *ND*, 12 January 1987; “Machtvolle Demonstration für Sozialismus und Frieden: Aufmarsch von über 200 000 Berlinern an den Gräbern von Karl und Rosa,” *ND*, 18 January 1988. The reports of the 1988 demonstration made no mention of the fact that counterdemonstrators had unfurled a sign with Luxemburg’s famous line, “Freiheit ist immer Freiheit der Andersdenkenden,” which led to the arrest of over one hundred people. See Marlies Menge, “*Ohne uns läuft nichts mehr*”: *Die Revolution in der DDR* (Stuttgart, 1990), 15–18, 247.

86. “Über 200 000 Berliner an den Gräbern von Karl und Rosa,” *ND*, 12 January 1987, 1, 3; “Aufmarsch von über 200 000 Berlinern an den Gräbern von Karl und Rosa,” *ND*, 18 January 1988, 1.



FIGURE 4: Legitimizing state socialism through Luxemburg and Liebknecht. In the top picture, Erich Honecker is waving to the crowds as he leads the state and party leadership in the traditional march. In the middle picture, at the Monument to Socialists, he is giving the KPD's clenched fist salute. The tablet behind him reads: "The dead summon us." Below, the crowd marches and lays flowers to honor the pioneers of socialism. "The legacy of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg lives in our actions for socialism and peace."

Source: *Neues Deutschland*, 18 January 1988.

Conclusion

By the last years of the GDR, Luxemburg had been turned into a paragon of state socialist stability and prosperity. Shock brigades in different factories took the names of Liebknecht or Luxemburg, and invariably overfilled their plan quotas. The January demonstrations provided yet another occasion for the ritual chant of “high productivity,” and it is strange indeed to see the GDR’s production of computer chips described as the fulfillment of the revolutionary legacy of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, or to watch a unit of the National People’s Army that bore the name “Rosa Luxemburg” march by in suitable military fashion.⁸⁷ Throughout the postwar years the commemorative march to Friedrichsfelde also provided a forum for opposition to West German rearmament and, especially in the 1980s, to the nuclear arms race. Newspaper reports carried suitable compendia of Luxemburg’s antimilitarist writings and expressions, which were easily connected with her sharp division of the world into revolutionaries and reactionaries. Initiating a line that would often be repeated in subsequent years, as the GDR gradually abandoned the efforts for a unified Germany and developed the dual-state theory, Pieck called Liebknecht and Luxemburg the “true defenders of the national interests of the German people.”⁸⁸ In a not untypical exercise in historical imagination, Hermann Axen, at the 1987 commemoration, claimed that:

Our German Democratic Republic realizes the great legacy of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. Our socialist workers’ and peasants’ state, the developed socialist society of the GDR—that is the most beautiful and the most worthy monument to the true pioneers and martyrs of the proletarian liberation struggle.⁸⁹

87. For some examples: “Das Vermächtnis von Karl Liebknecht und Rosa Luxemburg ist in der DDR erfüllt: Wir wissen uns in einer grossen Kampftradition,” *ND*, 12/13, January 1980, 9; “Im Geist von Karl und Rosa entschlossen für die Stärkung des Friedens und des Sozialismus,” *ND*, 14 January 1980; “Werktätige mit hohen Verpflichtungen für weiteren Leistungsanstieg 1980/Bekenntnis zur Politik der Vollbeschäftigung, des Volkswohlstandes, des Wachstums und der Stabilität/ . . . Leidenschaftliche Bekräftigung der antiimperialistischen Solidarität/Vorbeimarsch der Kampfgruppen der Arbeiterklasse,” *ND*, 14 January 1980; “Die Sache der Revolutionäre liegt bei uns in guten Händen,” *ND*, 15 January 1988, 3. Hermann Axen even found a quote from Luxemburg to support the notion that discipline and hard work for the fulfillment of the five-year plan signified a victory for socialism: “The socialist society needs men . . . [who are full of] passion and enthusiasm, for the general welfare, full of the joy of sacrifice and mutual sympathy . . .” “DDR—ein Eckpfeiler,” *ND*, 12 January 1987, 3. I watched the “Rosa Luxemburg” army unit march during the televised celebration of the GDR’s thirty-fifth anniversary in October 1984.

88. Wilhelm Pieck, “Wir erfüllen das Vermächtnis unserer Toten,” *ND*, 15 January 1950, 3.

89. “DDR—ein Eckpfeiler,” *ND*, 12 January 1987, 3.

Nevertheless, however strained some of the invocations, Luxemburg's language and ideology, both its inventiveness and its gross insufficiencies, contributed to the historical formation of German communism, and to the creation of a countertradition of the dissident, anti-Stalinist Left. Luxemburg gave vibrant expression to the possibilities and the limits of the socialist tradition. Her political and personal commitments were infused with hope in the future and the belief that human beings together could transform the limits of their own situation. But even at her most democratic, Luxemburg's thinking remains highly problematic—despite the ever increasing fascination with her politics and persona. All of the tensions were held together by her great intellectual and literary powers, but the rhetorical structures of her writings could not mask the uneasy tensions and even contradictions to which she gave expression.

Like later communist dissidents, Luxemburg provided highly insufficient grounds for democratic politics.⁹⁰ No less than Lenin, she furnished ideological and linguistic support for a politics of confrontation fought out in the streets of Berlin, Halle, Essen, and other industrial centers; of untrammelled opposition to political coalitions; of visceral hostility toward social democracy; of irreconcilable class and political conflict; of abiding faith in the efficacy of armed revolution. On all of these counts, Luxemburg contributed to the construction of the mass party in the Weimar years on the basis of an intransigent strategy of revolutionary militancy, rather than on a strategy based on political alliances and legislative reforms, as was true of other communist parties at a later period.⁹¹ This strategy constituted the crucial, formative experience of the KPD, a legacy that would be carefully nurtured and glorified in succeeding years, and that was carried over into the vastly altered circumstances of the Third Reich, the Soviet occupation, and the formation and development of the German Democratic Republic.

The careful cultivation of the militant legacy of the party—including major aspects of Luxemburg's politics and language—drastically limited the openness of the KPD and SED to other political strategies and ideas. Within the Comintern, the KPD remained the party most hostile to the popular front strategy.⁹² When German Communists were placed in power

90. As John Willoughby has written of another compelling and tragic figure, Nikolai Bukharin, one of the greatest tragedies lies in the fact that Bukharin's (like Luxemburg's) democratic sensibilities had such weak grounding in his own theoretical approach, and thereby offered little upon which to build adequate resistance to left-wing tyranny. See John Willoughby, "Confronting the New Leviathan: The Contradictory Legacy of Bukharin's Theory of the State," in Nicholas N. Kozlov and Eric D. Weitz, eds., *Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin: A Centenary Appraisal* (New York, 1990), 93–106.

91. See Weitz, *Popular Communism*, for a comparative analysis of the strategies through which the German, French, and Italian Communist parties became mass parties.

92. In almost ritual fashion, year in and year out, the Comintern in the 1930s sharply

by the Red Army at the end of World War II, their own political legacy drew them toward the very same policies promoted by the Soviet Union, policies that accorded the central state the primary role in the construction of society and that sharply demarcated state socialism from liberal capitalism. While some eastern European economies introduced elements of a market system as early as the 1960s and accepted private peasant agriculture, the GDR remained wedded to central planning and large-scale, socialized agriculture. While a number of European communist parties, east and west, gradually abandoned many of the undemocratic practices enshrined in the communist movement in the interwar years, the SED retained its affection for such Leninist hallmarks as democratic centralism, and for the Luxemburgist-Leninist tendency to demonize bourgeois political systems and to venerate the dictatorship of the proletariat.

It is, therefore, highly misleading to depict the history of German communism as a linear process whereby its radical, socialist-democratic and *German* character—articulated most completely by a Jewish woman born in Congress Poland—became supplanted in the course of the 1920s by bureaucratic, authoritarian, and *Russian* communism.⁹³ Instead, German communism was forged, ideologically and linguistically, from a Luxemburgist-Leninist synthesis that, while increasingly deprived of its democratic timbres, nonetheless retained recognizable aspects of its progenitors' commitments. Of course, in the process of political mobilization ideological traditions may be transformed in ways unimagined by their originators, but that

condemned the "sectarianism" of the KPD and its unwillingness to engage in popular front politics. Indeed, the KPD never did manage to conclude a united or popular front agreement with the SPD and other groups on the model of the French, Italian, and Spanish Communist parties, a result of the intransigence of both the exiled SPD leadership in Prague and of the KPD. The Comintern criticisms of the KPD carry a tone of exasperation and frustration that became more pronounced in the course of the 1930s as the war loomed closer and the German population appeared mired in passivity. These impressions are based on Comintern documents in the IGA, ZPA, including an undated and untitled document which, based on internal evidence, is a transcription of a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Comintern (hereafter ECCI) with the Politbüro of the KPD. See IGA, ZPA I 6/3/109, Bl. 3–24. Participants were Knorin, Pieck, Florin, Bronkowski, Ercoli (Togliatti) Manuilski, Kuusinen, Wan-Min, and Voss. See also "Resolution über die sektiererischen Fehler der KPD," adopted by Political Secretariat and confirmed by Präsidium [of ECCI] IGA, ZPA I 3/110, Bl. 12–16 and ECCI (Sekretariat Ercoli), "Resolution zu den nächsten Aufgaben der KPD," 17 March 1937, IGA, ZPA I 6/3/84, Bl. 85–95. The attacks on the KPD were often spearheaded by Togliatti, who must have felt sweet revenge for the savaging of his own party and leadership at the hands of German Communists, Ulbricht prominent among them, in 1929 at the ECCI's Tenth Plenum.

93. See Weber's introduction to *Gründungsparteitag* and the conclusion to *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus*, in which he states, in overly neat and simplistic fashion: "From the radical marxian-socialist party founded by Rosa Luxemburg developed the stalinist bureaucratic party [*Apparatpartei*], which oriented itself around the interests of Moscow." (1:350–51).

only renders problematic, it does not sunder, the historical link between ideological production and mass political movements.

But like all ideological traditions, Luxemburg's offered a multitude of possibilities. Communist dissidents, from Paul Levi and Heinrich Brandler in the 1920s to Wolfgang Harich and Robert Havemann in the 1950s and 1960s, summoned Luxemburg against the authoritarian and Stalinist tendencies in the party and the party-state. In the 1980s, members of the small opposition in the GDR developed their own political engagement and democratic ideas out of their reading of Luxemburg's critique of bureaucratic socialism and her vibrant plea for democratic practices.⁹⁴ When the reforms initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev offered new political possibilities, the East German citizenry grasped the opportunity to overthrow its regime and invoked Rosa Luxemburg in the process. While the regime found its own girders in aspects of her thinking, the GDR opposition mobilized Luxemburg's democratic sensibilities to support a revived politics of the streets centered around democratic and humanitarian goals. Luxemburg contra Luxemburg, a fitting enactment of the ambiguities intrinsic to her language and ideas.

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94. Many of the members of the opposition interviewed by Dirk Philipsen mention reading Luxemburg as part of their own political evolution. See idem, *We Were the People: Voices from East Germany's Revolutionary Autumn of 1989* (Durham, 1993).