**Rosa Luxemburg’s**

**Concept of Spontaneity and Creativity**

**in Proletarian Mass Movements -**

**Theory and Practice**

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In May 1898 the Polish born Rosa Luxemburg came from her exile in the idyllic Switzerland to Berlin the busy industrialized capital city of the German empire. She was going to join the German social democratic movement which party – the SPD – was the strongest socialist party of that time. Rosa Luxemburg wanted to support the party in its fight for a socialist society as the final goal in a later future and for short-term political and social achievements for the proletarians, too.

Rosa Luxemburg was a tiny woman not much taller than 1 m 50 cm looking then (in 1898) with her 28 years like a college girl. But she belonged to the very few women of the late 19th century who had a doctor’s degree namely in political sciences from the Swiss university of Zurich. As one of the leaders of the Polish socialist party, the SDKPiL (Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania), in the Swiss exile and as one of the editors of its party journal she was already well acquainted with the European labor movement. A few months after her arrival in Germany she gained her first merits in campaigning successfully for the GermanSocial Democratic Party (SPD) in the East German province of Silesia showing her talent as an excellent orator and as a brilliant writer not hesitating to fulfill the duties of the daily hard organizational work under difficult conditions.

Some months after her arrival in Germany she already was chief editor of the “Arbeiterzeitung” (Workers’ Newspaper) in the city of Dresden. Most important during those first years in Germany were her convincing articles in German socialist newspapers in late 1898 and in 1899 defending the revolutionary socialist program of 1891 against the right wing Social Democrats who were intellectually represented by Eduard Bernstein. These lively essays soon published as a booklet under the title “Social Reform or Revolution?” with many editions over the years soon made her name most popular in the German and also in the European labor movement.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Additional to her fight against revisionism Luxemburg made further crucial theoretical and practical contributions to the German and international socialist labor movement on issues like a) the Marxist political economy[[2]](#footnote-2), b) the resistance against the German militarism and the imperialistic war policy of the capitalistic states, c) the necessity of basic democracy in a socialist party and d) an active revolutionary policy of the socialist leadership with full participation of the proletarian masses in all aspects of the revolutionary tactics.

In the last mentioned issue the notion of “spontaneity” of the proletarian masses plays an important role. Evaluating the events of the Russian Revolution of 1905/06 in a special booklet “The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions” (1906)Luxemburg concludes that spontaneity of the masses was of significant importance for a successful development of the revolutionary movement. She watched in Russia that the spontaneous action of the masses strengthens the readiness for action and the creativity of the fighting proletariat. [[3]](#footnote-3) In the following disputes on Luxemburg’s ideas the German socialist party and union leaders worried that spontaneous mass actions would weaken the labor organizations. Something similar happened since the mid 1920th when the German left radical communist leaders Ruth Fischer and Arkadi Maslow and later the Bolshevik critics blamed Luxemburg’s ideas on the value of spontaneity in revolutionary movements for damaging the labor organization. Important is the opinion of the historian Peter Nettl that Rosa Luxemburg never created a spontaneity theory. In fact the notion of “spontaneity theory” as part of the so called “Luxemburgism” was only a construct of the inner communist debate of the 1920th and 1930th used as a weapon against all inner party minority groups.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Looking at the most important academic Rosa Luxemburg biographers they all have a positive view on her ideas concerning the spontaneity.

The English scholar **Peter Nettl** analyzes the consequences of Luxemburg’s ideas on the spontaneity of the masses and the role of party leadership and masses not only for the year 1906 but also for the following period with the mass strike debate in the German socialist party in 1910 and again from1912 to the outbreak of war in August 1914.[[5]](#footnote-5) For him Luxemburg’s thesis is important that the strengthening of the socialist organization is the product of – frequently spontaneous – actions of the proletarian masses. Therefore the leadership should not fear the fights caused by the spontaneity. But Nettl does not mention anything on the correlation between Luxemburg’s concept of spontaneity of the masses with the connected increase of creativity and readiness for action.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The French historian **Gilbert Badia** emphasizes that spontaneity is connected with a political, economic and social development which raises the class consciousness of the proletariat intensified by the pedagogical efforts of the party leadership. But Badia neglects to write on the effects of spontaneity, too.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In her Rosa Luxemburg biography the well-known German female historian **Annelies Laschitza** – without going into the details - points out the importance of spontaneity for mass actions but also makes clear that Luxemburg did not neglect the role of the party organization. In this context Laschitza emphasizes Luxemburg’s confidence in the proletarian masses.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It was not a scholar but a famous politician who accentuates the strong connection between the spontaneity and the creativity of the proletarian masses in a revolutionary movement in the writings of Rosa Luxemburg. **Willy Brandt,** chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1969-1974, Nobel Peace Award Winner in 1971, chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Germany from 1964-1987 and of the Socialist International from 1976-1992, also chair of the North-South-Commission of the United Nations since 1977, studied in the mid 1980th intensively the life and work of Rosa Luxemburg and wrote a much contemplated long biographical sketch, a kind of sophisticated biographical study, originally intended as a broadcast lecture, later printed in the theoretical journal of the SPD. Here Brandt emphasizes: “For her [Rosa Luxemburg], human progress was possible only by democratic development, not by **paternalism**, but by participation of the masses whose spontaneous power and creative spirit [underlining by OL] she believed in."[[9]](#footnote-9)

Brandt refers obviously to Rosa Luxemburg’s 1904 booklet on Russian party affairs where she criticizes Lenin’s party concept with the words: “The ultracentralism that Lenin advocates seems to us, in its whole essence, to be imbued, not with a positive creative spirit, [underlining by OL] but with the sterile spirit of the night-watchman state. His line of thought is concerned principally with the control of party activity and not with its fertilization, with *narrowing* and not with *broadening,* with *tying the movement up* and not with *drawing it together*.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Luxemburg saw the danger that Lenin’s ideas of an extreme centralistic party leadership would damage the creativity and weaken the activity of the proletarian masses which were needed for a successful revolutionary action.

Brandt’s phrasing makes clear that there is a strong connection between spontaneity and creativity in Luxemburg’s basic democratic concept of a socialist movement. We find this connection in many of Rosa Luxemburg’s writings and speeches though mostly not expressis verbis but by sense.

This is most clearly expressed in her important brochure of 1906 “**The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions”.** There she turns over to an offensive strategy of the socialist movement. On the base of her personal experiences in the First Russian Revolution of 1905/06 she appeals for using all opportunities to motivate the proletarian masses to action proclaiming the importance of the political mass strike. As these experiences in Russia had shown to her the spontaneity of the masses played an important role for the rise and decline of a revolutionary development. The party leaders should accept, support and use the spontaneity and creativity of the masses. But they should neither wait passively for a revolutionary development nor should they merely give orders for the start of a mass strike. They must take over the political leadership in encouraging the readiness of the workers with speeches driving things forward.[[11]](#footnote-11) Luxemburg put the emphasis on the spontaneous action of the masses and on the socialist party’s forward driving agitation, not on the organizational party work and on pure orders of the leadership. This strategy will not weaken but strengthen the socialist organization as Luxemburg watched in the First Russian Revolution: Numerous new organizations grew up in different parts of the Tsarist Empire and the weak socialist movement increased on the whole. This was the result of the “spontaneous power and creative spirit” (to use Willy Brandt’s phrasing) of the Russian masses.

Her book “**The Crisis of the Social Democracy**” written in spring 1915 was a sharp analysis of the reasons of war and of the reactions of the European social democratic parties. She described the horrors of the first months of war and the humanitarian catastrophe. She remembered all the antiwar resolutions and pre-war antimilitaristic speeches of the socialist party leaders. She analyzes the politics of the imperial German government giving the proof for its intention of war since years. (Interestingly a well known German historian Fritz Fischer assumed a similar point of view in the 1960ies[[12]](#footnote-12) with a following fierce public discussion for years.) Rosa Luxemburg’s conclusions were that the socialist labor movement should claim the decision on war – or against war - to the people including the demand for a republican constitution for Germany. The existing half-absolutistic constitution gave almost all rights including the decision on war to the emperor and his government not to the parliament the Reichstag. Rosa Luxemburg’s booklet (published illegally during war times in several editions with a pseudonym author name “Junius”) was a flaming appeal of humanity and anti imperialism.

It is interesting that Luxemburg is denying the possibility of anti war mass actions in the first war days by order of the SPD leadership because such a movement can come only out of the proletarian masses. She confirms her ideas from the mass strike booklet of 1906 that mass actions cannot be ordered by the party leaders but must develop out of the many factors of the political, social, and economic situation with an ideological guidance and a motivating forward driving agitation by the party leadership.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Though more indirectly she refers again to the creativity of the masses when she uses phrases which seem to foresee the spontaneous outbreak of the German Novemberrevolution of 1918 starting with the mutinies of the sailors on the war ships in the harbor cities of Germany: “The great historical hour itself creates the forms that will carry the revolutionary movements to a successful outcome, creates and improvises new weapons, enriches the arsenal of the people unknown and unheard of by the party and its leaders.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

In her unfinished manuscript **“The Russian Revolution” (September/October 1918)** the role of the socialist party leaders – here the Bolsheviks – and the masses during the first steps of realization of the socialist society is analyzed by Rosa Luxemburg. She emphasizes the importance of unrestricted democracy “as a powerful corrective – namely the living movement of the masses, their unending pressure. And the more democratic the institutions, the livelier and stronger the pulse-beat of the political life of the masses, the more direct and complete is their influence…” She objects Trotsky’s and Lenin’s attempts to eliminate “democracy as such” because of its lacks. In contrast to the Bolshevik leaders Luxemburg argues that democracy is “the very living source from which alone can come the correction of all the innate shortcomings of social institutions. That source is the active, untrammelled, energetic political life of the broadest masses of the people.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Theses phrases gives the base for all of her other detailed considerations like freedom of speech, freedom of the press, “the unlimited right of association an assemblage” etc. For Luxemburg the activity and creativity of the masses should not be restricted because the development of a socialist society is such a long lasting, difficult task where all of the creative capabilities of the masses are needed to have success.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**In the Spartacus Program** of mid December 1918 **–** two weeks later adapted as the program of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) – Rosa Luxemburg reaffirms the necessity of a full participation of the masses during the period of realization of a socialist society which “cannot be decreed by any bureau, committee, or parliament. It can be begun and carried out only by the masses of people themselves… The essence of socialist society consists in the fact that the great laboring mass ceases to be a dominated mass, but rather, makes the entire political and economic life its own life and gives that life a conscious, free and autonomous direction.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

For Luxemburg there are three reasons to demand again and again the acceptance of full participation of the masses including their spontaneity. The first fundamental reason is her idea of a human being as a free, self determined creature from birth on, though she is fully aware that in a capitalistic society the worker is stamped by a kind of machine or slave mentality and needs to develop to a free and social human being. Therefore it is most natural that all proletarians must be treated as autonomous personalities by the socialist leadership. The second reason is that only by accepting and even encouraging the spontaneity of the masses the proletariat can develop its (using once again Willy Brandt’s phrase) “spontaneous power and creative spirit” which are needed to seize the political power and to build up the socialist society. The party leadership will give the ideological frame and the nearer and farther goals for the masses being always in a permanent dialogue with them.

Rosa Luxemburg did develop neither a political theory of a socialist democracy nor a spontaneity theory. But out of all of her writings and speeches grew a basic democratic concept of the proletarian mass movement with an important role of the spontaneity which cannot be seen only as a purpose for itself or only as a question of the relationship between proletarian masses and their leaders. For spontaneity is only the prerequisite for creativity and the readiness for actions. Only if the socialist leaders accept und encourage the spontaneity in a complete democratic environment the full creativity and strength of the proletarian masses will be set free – increasing the organization, too - in the fight for the political power and the following building up of a socialist society.

**Spontaneity and Creativity of the Proletarian Masses in the Reality of War Time**

Since her important essay “Mass Strikes, Political Party and Trade Unions” of 1906 Rosa Luxemburg was the outstanding protagonist of the revolutionary mass strike idea in Germany. But she also made a most important contribution to the antimilitaristic socialist movement when she contributed – together with Lenin – to the phrasing of the famous anti war resolution at the 1907 congress of the Socialist International in the German city of Stuttgart. The French socialists had asked for a radically formulated declaration while the German party leaders like August Bebel pled for a moderate phrasing because they feared that the German party, the SPD, would be banned by the imperial government in case of a radical resolution. A commission of the congress with Rosa Luxemburg as one of its members worked out a text which was accepted unanimously by the congress. This declaration was used by left socialists as fundamental argumentation for their antimilitaristic fight whether already in peacetime or especially since the outbreak of the World War in 1914. This resolution says: In case of a threatening war the workers of all nations and the socialist parties with their delegates in the parliaments are obliged to do everything possible to prevent the outbreak. “Should war break out nonetheless, it is their [the socialist parties] duty to intervene in favor of its speedy termination, and to do all in their power to utilize the economic and political crisis caused by the war to rouse the people and thereby to hasten the abolition of capitalist class rule.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

In her additional remarks in the antimilitarism commission of the same congress Rosa Luxemburg emphasized just the last part of the resolution with its appeal for strong actions.[[19]](#footnote-19) Though it was generally formulated it ought to be understood by the socialists to work most actively into the direction of a revolution especially in the case of a longer lasting war.

**The militarism of the half-absolute German Empire**

But already in peace time before the outbreak of World War I in August 1914 the political conditions in Germany for the socialist labor movement were difficult: The German Empire was a state of half-absolutism. There was a parliament – Reichstag - with the only effective right of accepting or rejecting the budget. But this was a powerless instrument because in the case of rejection the imperial government would order new elections which happened twice in the last 20 years before the war. Very undemocratic conditions ruled in the powerful German kingdom of Prussia which king was also the emperor of the German Reich. In Prussia, also in the kingdom of Saxony, there was the so called “Drei-Klassen-Wahlrecht“ (“Three-Class- Franchise”[right to vote]). That means that the vote of a rich man was a hundred times more worth than the vote of a worker.

In the pre-war years the discussion in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) came up repeatedly whether there was the right time to start a campaign for a political strike. Though the SPD was rapidly growing the party leadership became more and more hesitating and cautious in the fear of government repressions. For the old party leaders still remembered the time of illegal work over a decade (1878-1890) when the SPD was outlawed. Nevertheless the left wing urged since 1906 for an offensive tactic which included the political mass strike. And Luxemburg was one of the leading speakers and writers of this group.[[20]](#footnote-20)

**Rosa Luxemburg and the Anti War Actions[[21]](#footnote-21)**

In summer 1914 it seems to be as if the German Social Democratic Party was unanimously opposing any war politics of the Imperial German government. It looked like a confirmation of this profound and strong antimilitaristic attitude when at the moment of a threatening war in July 1914 almost one million German workers following an appeal of the SPD showed their protest in mass demonstrations against the imperialistic policy of the government.[[22]](#footnote-22)

However when the German emperor - the Kaiser - proclaimed war in the first days of August 1914 the SPD leadership not even stopped all protest actions, voted on August 4th together with the whole social democratic parliamentary group unanimously in favour of the war credits and gave up any opposition against the imperial government in the following years of war. The leading German social democrats argued with the main argument of the necessity of defence against the despotism of the Russian tsarist regime. And the socialist parties of Austria-Hungaria, Great-Britain and France supported for different reasonstheir governments, too. All socialist parties – at least most of their leaders – had forgotten the resolution of the International Socialist Congresses for actions against war.

For Luxemburg it was not only a great disappointment when the German socialist members of parliament accepted the war credits unanimously and the party gave up her fundamental opposition to the imperial state. At the first moment this looked for her as the complete destruction of her political life work. From contemporary sources we know that she had a grave psychological breakdown when she heard the news of voting for the war credits.

But nevertheless right from the first days of war Rosa Luxemburg with some political friends like Clara Zetkin, Franz Mehring and Wilhelm Pieck, joined soon by the Member of Parliament Karl Liebknecht, tried to regain the party for the old principles of the SPD, for a policy of active antiwar actions. They tried to organize the left wing and to agitate in the party for a return to a socialist antiwar policy. Slowly more and more members of the party joined them. But altogether it was still a small minority during the first war year. In December 1915 as one success of the Luxemburg group 20 SPD members of the Reichstag rejected the war credits and thus broke the ‘holy discipline’ of the parliamentary group as Karl Liebknecht did already since December 1914. Finally in February 1917 the whole – meanwhile quite numerous - opposition group was expelled from the SPD and founded in April 1917 an own party, the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD). The USPD could take over a numerous minority of the members of the old party, the SPD. But since the SPD could keep the majority of the membership in its organization, the name “Majority Social Democrats” or “MSPD” was often used for them.

The left radical group around Luxemburg and Liebknecht had their own inner party initiatives though since spring 1915 they worked together with the moderate opposition group around the left party leaders Hugo Haase and Georg Ledebour for more than one year. In January 1916 the Luxemburg-Liebknecht-Group separated from the moderate opposition, founded an own group “Group International” which was rather well known as “Spartacus Group” (according to their illegal periodical “Spartacus”) and joined the USPD in April 1917 as an autonomous group. At first the group around Rosa Luxemburg the later named “Spartacus Group” contributed to the increase of the opposition in the SPD aiming at a return of the SPD to her old oppositional antimilitaristic policy. Since summer 1916 the Luxemburg-Liebknecht-Group made own attempts to initiate anti war mass actions.

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**Repressions against the opposition and its socialist anti war agitation**

As well for the inner party agitation as for the attempts for general mass actions the conditions were most unfavorable for the left wing forces. Under the state of siege the political police and the military authorities prosecuted the organizational work of the SPD opposition and its agitation. Many members of the social democratic opposition were imprisoned for printing or distributing anti war pamphlets, for being involved in peace actions whether demonstration or strike. Especially the members of the Spartacus Group and other active left wing members were hit by these prosecutions. The result was that the left socialists were weakened intensively after every mass action and also in between. During the last weeks of the war most of the leaders of the Spartacus Group and other left radicals and even more of the rank and file were imprisoned or – as an act of punishment - in the army. Thus most of the left socialist groups were eliminated.

Most important: There were only a very few SPD news papers belonging to the opposition. Even they could not write frankly but they were under strict censorship of the military authorities. Most of the SPD and trade unions news papers and - of cause – all the bourgeois papers supported the war politics of the imperial government. The Spartacus pamphlets could not balance the overwhelming media power of the bourgeois and right wing majority social democrats. Not to forget: the wide spread belief in the government authorities, in the proposed victory in the war with the result of active support of the imperial government policies or at least passivity. These attitudes predominated not only in the bourgeois part of the population but for a long term in the German proletariat, too.

The continuous repressions against the socialist peace activists and the superiority of the bourgeois media - including that of the majority social democrats - explain why only a very few political mass actions happened – in spite of the unexpected length of war with its innumerable victims, and in spite of the grave food shortage.

**The Liebknecht Strike in June 1916 in Berlin**

On 1 May 1916 in Berlin the peace demonstration by the Spartacus Group was half a success with about 2000 participants mostly members of the left socialist workers youth. But Karl Liebknecht was arrested out of the middle of the crowd and later on sentenced for more than 4 years of hard jail. This was the signal for Luxemburg to write a lot of pamphlets always with an appeal to protest against Liebknecht’s imprisonment and demand “Peace! Freedom! Bread!” Luxemburg’s long term comrade in the Russian-Polish socialist movement Leo Jogiches took care of the pamphlet printing and distributing. He was a master of clandestine work and it was due to his organizational talent that the Spartacus had the highest amount of illegal antiwar pamphlets of all the left groups. And most of those pamphlets were written by Luxemburg.

On May 1th, 1916 Karl Liebknecht was arrested and accused of organizing a socialist demonstration in the center of Berlin. When the Spartacus Group appealed for a protest demonstration against the Liebknecht trial at the end of June 1916 the informal group of left shop stewards of the metal unions (in the German Novemberrevolution 1918 known as “Revolutionary Shop Stewards”) supported this action and even organized a strike in favor of Liebknecht with 55.000 workers of the Berlin factories. Luxemburg with her Spartacus Group had appealed for an anti war mass demonstration and the basis of the Berlin labor movement reacted spontaneously with a much more offensive action namely a sympathy strike for the well known opponent of war Karl Liebknecht. This was the first political strike in Germany during World War I.

**The Bread Strike in Berlin and Leipzig in April 1917**

In the following months all efforts of the Spartacus Group with many pamphlets to motivate for new strikes failed. Even when in the winter of 1916, 1917 the food shortage was worsening and Germany was near to a famine there were no signs of anti war mass actions. It needed the announced reduction of the bread ration that the left shop stewards in the middle of April called for a 3 days strike in Berlin with 200.000 workers participating and demanding only for more food without political contents. The Spartacus Group distributed three pamphlets and achieved that 25.000 workers continued the strike for some days asking not only for more food, but also for peace and democracy. There were also strikes in Leipzig with 30.000, in Magdeburg and Kiel with 10.000 participants in each city. In the last 3 cities there were political demands from the beginning on. Altogether it was the first great antiwar strike movement in Germany. The Spartacus Group supported the action with 3 leaflets and in Berlin with some members in the strike committee. The main organizing persons were the left shop stewards and in Leipzig local officials of the new founded USPD. The continuation of the strike in Berlin with 25.000 workers with political demands was a spontaneous action supported by leaflets of the Spartacus Group and some speeches of left socialist members of parliament.

**The Ammunition Workers Strike in January 1918**

After the April strikes in 1917 several attempts were made in the following months of the year to initiate new strikes but they failed. Not sooner than at the end of 1917 the left shop stewards urged the USPD leadership for a new mass strike. One stimulating factor was the hesitating German government in the peace negotiations with the Lenin government.

The left shop stewards also contacted the leader of the Spartacus Group Leo Jogiches for supporting their attempts to win the USPD leadership for a public appeal for a mass strike. He could arrange that in the USPD central committee the Spartacus members from Stuttgart and Brunswick supported the left shop stewards. Finally in January 1918 the USPD distributed a leaflet with an indirect appeal for a mass strike to achieve peace with Russia. Unfortunately the USPD leaflet was seized by the police in several cities. But before and during the action the Spartacus Group had distributed 8 strike leaflets with an edition between 25.000 and 200.000. All over Germany there were more than half a million workers on strike. In Berlin even a Workers Council was created. Originally the strike was planned for a three days period. But spontaneously it happened that in Berlin more than 400.000 workers stayed out of the factories for a whole week showing their protest against the imperial government in many mass demonstrations.

This happened in spite of the hard suppression by the military authorities from the beginning on. A lot of the strike leaders were sentenced to jail, several ten thousand in Berlin were sent to the army. Though the strike action itself was successful according to the number of participants the action had no effect regarding the appeals for peace, democracy and more food. It looked as if the suppression of the imperial government had won. Therefore all attempts on further strikes in the next months were given up by the left socialists. The situation was so discouraging that during their meetings until late September 1918 the German revolutionaries did not expect further mass actions but in winter1918/19. Additionally one must know that the Spartacus Group at the end of March 1918 did not lose only his leader Leo Jogiches but a lot of the involved Spartacist comrades by imprisonment. The suppression of the Spartacus Group by the government authorities was continued when in August 1918 Jogiches’ successor Karl Schulz and his little group were arrested and a little later members of regional groups, too. That means that the Spartacus Group around Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht was very much weakened at the entrance of the German Novemberrevolution 1918.

**The Successful Mass Action: the November Revolution 1918**

At the end of September 1918 the defeat of the German army got known to the public and the military leaders Hindenburg and Ludendorff asked the politicians to start armistice negotiations. It was not sooner than at this moment that the socialist revolutionaries became hopeful again. But even at the end of October and in the very first days of November the mood was not in favor of a revolutionary mass action, neither in the Berlin factories nor in most of the left socialist groups all over Germany.

So the spontaneous outbreak of the revolutionary movement in the German harbor cities with the mutinies of the sailors spreading across the country to western Germany since 4 November was a big surprise not only to the general public but also to the left socialists who attempted revolutionary mass actions since years.

There were several sites of revolutionary mass movements: The mutinous sailors taking the revolutionary flame from the coast to the interior of the country and awaking the workers and soldiers for the upheaval forming ‘Workers and Soldiers Councils’ like in Russia. A special development had Munich were the USPD leader Kurt Eisner gave the initiative for the revolution. Another special case was Hanau a city near Frankfurt/Main where the strong Spartacus Group seized power on its own initiative.

In Berlin the massive antirevolutionary propaganda of the government, of the majority social democrats who had joined the government and cooperated with the bourgeois parties, and of the whole bourgeois media contributed to the passivity of the workers. Therefore the ‘Revolutionary Shop Stewards’ postponed the uprising in Berlin to the 11th of November though Liebknecht and the Spartacists urged for an earlier action. When on 8th of November the police started with arresting some left socialist leaders the revolutionary committee (Shop Stewards, USPD, Spartacus) at once shifted the date of uprising to the 9th of November distributing leaflets for the action and giving arms to the workers. In spite of all the massive antirevolutionary propaganda by the government, the bourgeois and the right Majority Social Democratic Party media the workers in almost all factories followed the appeal for the uprising. So the old imperial government in Berlin with the Chancellor Prince Max of Baden forces retreated, too. The revolution was victorious all over Germany.

The outbreak of the German Revolution in 1918 with the following seize of power by the workers and soldiers councils was a good example for the spontaneity and creativity of the proletarians in a revolutionary mass action. After their mutiny on the war ships the sailors spread spontaneously from the coast of Germany into the interior of the country and caused upheavals in many cities without resistance of the old authorities. Everywhere the traveling sailors were very soon stimulating the seize of power by founding of workers and soldiers councils in a spontaneous development in different creative ways.

Here Luxemburg’s prediction in her booklet “The Crisis of the Social Democracy” (1915) was realized: “The great historical hour itself creates the forms that will carry the revolutionary movements to a successful outcome, creates and improvises new weapons, enriches the arsenal of the people unknown and unheard of by the party and its leaders.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Luxemburg was imprisoned from July 1916 until the 8th of November. Again in freedom she joined her comrades of the Spartacus Group in Berlin on the 11th of November 1918. For the next months she fought against the reactionary development in Germany. But it was in vain. On the 15th of January 1919 she and the other Spartacus leader Karl Liebknecht were murdered by pre fascist German soldiers in command of the majority social democratic government in Berlin. Since she failed to realize her goals the question is coming up: Why is there so much attention to a female politician who acted 100 years ago? I think it is the combination of her fate, her martyrdom, of her characteristics as a steadfast and honest socialist, as an effective orator at mass assemblies and a brilliant convincing Marxist writer.

Rosa Luxemburg’s body could be killed but her ideas could not be erased and has left deep traces in Germany and in many other countries not only during her life time but even until today.

I think she left us five messages:

- 1st Socialism means full democracy: not only political equality but also the economic, social und legal equality (this is the old Marxist program shared by all socialist parties during Rosa Luxemburg’s life time but later on - especially today - mostly forgotten);

- 2nd Socialism means basic democracy: decisions by full broad participation of the people not mainly by the leaders;

- 3rd Socialism means humanity and solidarity: no indifference concerning suppression and misery all over the world and no use of suppression by socialists,

- 4th the fight against imperialism cannot consist of resolutions alone but consists of a varied row of actions due to the consciousness of the people who are carrying the actions,

- 5th Rosa Luxemburg’s summarized main message following a sentence by Friedrich Engels the closest comrade of Karl Marx: there are only two alternatives for mankind: socialism or the development of capitalism to barbarism - there is no third possibility.[[24]](#footnote-24)

1. For biographical information, see: [German:] Peter Nettl: Rosa Luxemburg, Köln Berlin 1965 (original English version: J. P. Nettl: Rosa Luxemburg, 2 vols., Oxford 1966); Peter Hudis, Kevin B. Anderson (ed.), Introduction, in: The Rosa Luxemburg Reader, New York 2004, pp. 8-14; the German standard biography: Annelies Laschitza: Im Lebensrausch, trotz alledem. Rosa Luxemburg. Eine Biographie, Berlin 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Peter Hudis (ed.): The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg, vol. 1, Economic Writings 1, London, New York 2013. Volume 2 of the Economic Writings will follow in 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rosa Luxemburg Reader, pp.197-199; Rosa Luxemburg: Gesammelte Werke, Bd. 2, 1906 – Juni 1911, hrsg. von der Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Gesell­schafts­analyse und Politische Bildung e. V., wissenschaftliche Betreuung der 6. Auflage: Annelies Laschitza, 6., überarbeitete Auflage, Berlin 2004, pp. 132-134, p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Peter Nettl: Rosa Luxemburg, Köln Berlin 1965, pp.766-769. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibd., pp. 476-523 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibd., pp. 484-486. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Gilbert Badia: Rosa Luxemburg. Journaliste. Polémiste. Révolutionnaire, pp.92-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Annelies Laschitza. Im Lebensrausch …, pp. 254-255. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Translation by the author; the original German text: „Für sie war Fortschritt der Menschheit nur durch demokratische Entfaltung denkbar, nicht durch Gängelung, sondern durch Mitwirkung der Massen, an deren spontane Kraft und schöpferischen Geist sie glaubte.“ In: Willy Brandt: Rosa Luxemburg. In: Neue Gesellschaft, Frankfurter Hefte. 357 (1989), no. 4, pp. 348-357, here p. 352. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Rosa Luxemburg Reader, p. 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibd., pp.197-199; Rosa Luxemburg: Gesammelte Werke, Bd. 2, pp. 132-134, p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Fritz Fischer, Der Griff nach der Weltmacht, Düsseldorf 2000 (Paperback) (1st edition: Düsseldorf 1961); ibid.,World Power or Decline. The Controversy over ’Germany’s aims in the First World War’, transl. and ed. by Lancelot L. Farrar, Robert Kimber, Rita Kimber, New York 1974, also London 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Paul LeBlanc (ed.), Rosa Luxemburg, Reflections and Writings, New York 1999, pp.199-210; The Rosa Luxemburg Reader, pp.312-341. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibd., pp.328-329. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rosa Luxemburg Reader, p. 302; Rosa Luxemburg: Gesammelte Werke, Bd. 4, August 1914 bis Januar 1919, hrsg. von der Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Gesell­schafts­analyse und Politische Bildung e. V., wissenschaftliche Betreuung der 6. Auflage: Annelies Laschitza, 6., überarbeitete Auflage, Berlin 2000, S. 355 f. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Rosa Luxemburg Reader, pp. 304-306, quotation: p. 304. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibd., p. 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. R. Craig Nation: War on War. Lenin, the Zimmerwald Left, and the Origins of Communist Internationalism, Chicago 2009, p.15-16, quotation: p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Rosa Luxemburg: Gesammelte Werke, Band 2, p. 237-238. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Pierre Broué: The German Revolution 1917-1923, Chicago 2006, pp. 1-26, English reprint of the French original from 1971; Dieter Groh: Negative Integration und revolutionärer Attentismus. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges, Frankfurt/M., Berlin, Wien 1973, pp. 17-575 (a most informative German standard book on German prewar society and the social democracy). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For the following chapters see: David D. Morgan: The Socialist Left and the German Revolution. A History of the German Indipendant Social Democratic Party, 1917-1922, Ithaca and London 1975, pp. 35-117, especially pp. 80-91 (mass strikes), pp. 112-117 (Novemberrevolution 1918); William A. Pelz: The Spartakusbund and the German Working Class Movement 1914-1919, Lewiston, New York [USA]/ Queenston, Ontario [Canada] 1987, pp.65-160; for recent studies using the now unlocked archives of the former East German and Soviet archives: Ralf Hoffrogge: Richard Müller. Der Mann hinter der Novemberrevolution, Berlin 2008, especially pp. 38-73; Ottokar Luban: Rosa Luxemburgs Demokratiekonzept. Ihre Kritik an Lenin und ihr politisches Wirken 1913-1919, Leipzig 2008, pp. 51-63, 127-171. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See the important research results in: Wolfgang Kruse, Krieg und nationale Integration. Eine Neuinterpretation des sozialdemokratischen Burgfriedensschlusses 1914/15, Essen 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The Rosa Luxemburg Reader, pp. 328-329. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See for instance Rosa Luxemburg’s speech at the founding convention of the German communist party (December 31, 1919) in: The Rosa Luxemburg Reader, p.364. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)