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The Socialist Network

[Scott McLemee](#)

My dear Rosa,

You will not, I trust, take this mode of address as disrespectful, least of all coming, as it does, from a comrade. Familiarity with you makes contempt impossible. Your name belongs on even the shortest list of revolutionary theorists, though our academic Marxists, prone to quoting Lukács and Lyotard, rarely cite Luxemburg. As a young militant—this was not yesterday!—I studied your pamphlet of 1900, *Reform or Revolution*, as a cornerstone of the socialist tradition. And so is your analysis of the mass strike, written after the Russian revolution of 1905, which seems exceptionally timely again today, when people around the world fill the streets to protest austerity and to bring down dictators.



Perhaps the "comrades in armchairs" (to pull the professors' noses a bit) will yet discover Luxemburg as a name to drop. But people who take political inspiration from your work have been prone, for generations now, to calling you Rosa instead. Even the anarchists do it! You must find that perplexing. They treat you as a kindred spirit: the antithesis of Lenin and Trotsky. To be sure, you criticized the Bolsheviks—though no more than the Bolsheviks criticized themselves at the time. And you joined forces with them in denouncing those on the left who concocted "progressive" rationalizations for their countries' warlords. (So much has changed in a century, Rosa! And so little.)

The affection with which we speak your name is not, let me explain, a sentimental response to your political writings. They are as hard-edged as those of any polemicist. You did not suffer renegades gladly. Someone once asked what the epitaph should be for you and your friend Clara Zetkin, and you said, "Here lie the last two men of German social democracy." The quip was not appreciated by party leaders, and our feminists would give you a stern lecture. But then, you wouldn't have much use for the contemporary American left, where mutual policing of verbal behavior often counts as activism.

You, by contrast, went to prison more than once and spent most of the First World War there; and the right wing murdered you during the German revolution of 1919, dumping your body in a canal. We admire martyrs, but usually without feeling an intimate connection to them. That changed in the early 1920s, when the letters you wrote in prison were published.

I suppose your hatred of war, and your confidence that it and other social brutalities could be uprooted, would count as romantic, by the cruel standards of today's realpolitik. But as you described the birds coming to your cell's window, your moments of elation and despair, the passages of Goethe you had memorized, the yearning to see your cat, Mimi—here, you seemed to be writing in your heart's blood, and the reader found it natural to consider you a friend, almost. You became our Rosa.

Selections from your correspondence have been available in English, but now Verso has published the most comprehensive collection of your letters as the first volume in an edition of your collected works. It is embarrassing how few of your political and economic writings have been translated into my language across the past nine decades. But then, it was never in the interest of the so-called socialist countries to make your work known, since your hatred of authoritarianism of any kind was so clear. The team that prepared this edition has done a wonderful job of it, gathering many items not available in English before and providing an extremely thorough and useful glossary of the names of the people you wrote to or mentioned in passing. The translation is an abridgment of a German collection that is, in turn, drawn from a six-volume edition (also containing postcards and telegrams). Peter Hudis, the American among the editors, also worked on the excellent *Rosa Luxemburg Reader* in 2004. Does this revival of your work in English reflect a sudden growth in an audience for it? So one may hope, but with doubts. It certainly helps that there is an international Rosa Luxemburg foundation that assisted in the publication of the new book.

Visiting you again in these quarters, I am moved, not so much by the lyricism this time, but by the tremendous passion suggested in a hundred little details of your life as a political operative—a woman who worked full-time for socialist and labor organizations. By 1893, barely out of adolescence, you were in Geneva working on a newspaper for industrial workers back home, in Poland. Besides writing your own articles, you had to revise mediocre efforts of other contributors, and pay the printer, and sneak each issue into the country.

The conflicts, personal and political, never ended. Nor did the scarcity of money. And when you settled in Germany—marrying a comrade to gain citizenship—all the storm and stress continued on a still higher level. You went after the careerists and middle-of-the-roaders with hammer and tongs in your articles, but there is so little bitterness here (even when you are tormented by scoundrels and sexist pigs) that it is, if not saintly, at the very least exemplary. The self-portrait in these pages is that of a professional revolutionary whose vocation is, if you'll pardon the expression, spiritual.

My epistle has run longer than intended, yet something remains unsaid. While in prison in 1917, you wrote to a friend, saying, "I know that for every person, for every creature, one's own life is the only single possession one really has, and with every little fly that one carelessly swats and crushes . . . it is the same as if the end of the world had destroyed all life." Reading that passage, and many another page in this book, I could not help falling in love with you, dear Rosa.

Please consider me, then, now, and always, yours for the revolution, S.

Scott McLemee is a member of the editorial board of the journal *New Politics*.

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