

A Marxist Heroine

J. P. NETTL: *Rosa Luxemburg*

London-New York-Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1966. 2 vols.

Reviewed by Abraham Ascher

THESE TWO VOLUMES are clearly a labor of love. Aside from reading widely in published sources, Mr. Nettl—lecturer in politics at the University of Leeds—sought out people who had information about Rosa Luxemburg, and he ransacked the archives in Warsaw, East Germany, Bonn, Amsterdam and Israel in the preparation of his study. It is hard to imagine that he missed anything of consequence relating to his heroine, who in her time, he believes, attracted more people to revolutionary Marxism than any other socialist leader. This is no doubt an exaggeration growing out of Nettl's strong emotional attachment to his subject—an understandable sentiment, yet one that seems to be the cause of the study's major weaknesses. For one thing, the work is too long and occasionally repetitious. Nettl had difficulty omitting the unessential; nor could he resist the temptation of correcting even inconsequential mistakes made by previous writers on Rosa Luxemburg. For example, he supplies a long footnote on a misdating of her arrest in 1916, although the error is of no particular importance. A thoughtful and imaginative writer with a strong analytical bent, Nettl raises many interesting problems, but unfortunately not all of them are quite relevant to his main subject, as he himself virtually acknowledges on one occasion.

Nevertheless, Mr. Nettl's work is extremely impressive and by far the most thorough and penetrating biography of Luxemburg. His task was

far from easy. Rosa Luxemburg not only was a leader of German social democracy for over two decades and one of the founders of the German Communist Party, but she also participated in establishing Polish social democracy and wrote extensively on the Russian movement. Moreover, she was a subtle theoretician and frequently engaged in polemics with the major figures of European socialism. From 1898, when she moved to Germany, until she was murdered in 1919, Luxemburg maintained a lively interest in all these activities. Nettl has faithfully recorded her contributions, always taking care to place them within the broadest possible historical setting.

Through extensive use of Luxemburg's correspondence, the author has also been able to provide a detailed description of her private life and personality. She emerges as a cultivated person with far-ranging tastes in art, literature and the sciences. She was also passionate, strong-willed and, above all, courageous and independent. In 1907, when she felt betrayed by Leo Jogiches, to whom she had been romantically attached for many years, she broke off their personal relations—without, however, ending her political collaboration with him. In 1898, when she was only 27 years old, she did not hesitate to engage in polemics against Eduard Bernstein, already a highly respected figure in German social democracy, and in 1904 she wrote one of the earliest and most incisive critiques of Lenin's organizational views.

After 1910, when her aim was to radicalize the German social democratic movement, she waged war against the leading theorist of European Marxism, Karl Kautsky. By now she was quite isolated in the movement, but this did not deter her from standing her ground. Nor did she flinch from opposing the party for its support of Germany's war effort after 1914, even though this brought on her not only the disapprobation of her colleagues but also imprisonment, often under very severe conditions.

Much as Nettl admires Luxemburg's views and courage, he does not neglect to point out that personal factors were often a consideration in her political stances. She was fiercely ambitious, and—as Nettl shows on the basis of an astute analysis of her private letters—she entered the lists against Bernstein largely in order to gain a reputation. “She was out to make a career for herself,” he writes, “and almost everything she said or did was tailored to this end. The fact that she was a revolutionary, that she instinctively rejected Bernstein's thesis, was a secondary consideration.” But Nettl is quick to stress that “this emphasis on the plain self-interest of her actions does not sully her motives.” For she was not “interested in power for its own sake.” A recurring theme of this study is that her primary concern was not power, but influence. More than anything else, she wanted to spread “those ideas which she held to be correct and important.”

Through the years the name Rosa Luxemburg has come to be identified with opposition to nationalism and revisionism, an original analysis of imperialism, and a “sympathetic critique” of Bolshevism in power. But her most significant contribution, as Nettl rightly emphasizes, was her doctrine of participation by the masses in the struggle for socialism. To be sure, she was not a systematic political theorist in the orthodox sense; she was, rather, a strategist and tactician who gave her proposals a theoretical underpinning which she believed would incorporate them into the Marxist creed. After 1905, however, she discussed her idea of “mass action” in such detail and from so many different practical and theoretical angles that Nettl is justified in treating it as a distinct political doctrine and as the very essence of “Luxemburgism.”

LUXEMBURG WAS PROMPTED to develop her ideas about mass action largely by her observation of the revolutionary turmoil in Warsaw late in

1905 and in 1906, especially the general strike of October 1905. After her return to Germany, she set herself the task of convincing her Western comrades that the mass strike—as exemplified by the events in Russia—was the most efficacious and highest form of revolutionary struggle against capitalism. The doctrine which emerged from her writings was bold, complicated, and subtle. She did not have in mind a single action designed primarily to procure better economic conditions. She expected the mass strike to embrace a whole series of mass actions, including, in her words,

... political and economic strikes, united and partial strikes, defensive strikes and combat strikes, general strikes of individual sections of industry and general strikes in entire cities, peaceful wage strikes and street battles, uprisings with barricades—all [of which] run together and run alongside each other, get in each other's way, overlap each other; a perpetually moving and changing sea of phenomena.

Reviewers in This Issue

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Only objective conditions would produce such an outburst of activity; the leaders could never determine its timing artificially. Nor was the mass strike to be confined to a short period of time. It would be the proletariat's most potent weapon during the revolutionary era, lasting perhaps years or even decades. The salient point in her doctrine was its emphasis on the political initiative of the masses, in whose judgment she had profound faith, rather than on the socialist leadership or the party organization. Once set in motion, mass action would, in her view, have the effect of drawing more people into the struggle, ultimately creating an active oppositional movement embracing the vast majority of the people.

This tactic contrasted sharply with Kautsky's *Ermattungsstrategie* (strategy of attrition) which had become the guideline for the German movement. While Kautsky was willing to tolerate street demonstrations, he did not want to see them intensified to the point where a "head-on clash with society" would take place. Placing his trust in the electoral process, Kautsky confidently expected the Socialists to win at the polls, and then, with the Reichstag safely under their control, to stage a peaceful revolution. Once the issue had been joined between the two protagonists, Luxemburg became the most notable spokesman of the German Left.

Given her preoccupation with mass participation, it is not surprising that Luxemburg's attitude towards the Bolshevik regime was far from wholly approving. Despite her disillusionment with German social democracy and her yearning for proletarian action against the war and capitalism, she was "far more afraid of a deformed revolution than an unsuccessful one." While in prison in the summer of 1918, she set down her doubts in a pamphlet which her friend and colleague, Paul Levi, persuaded her not to publish on the ground that it could be misused by her enemies. The consistency of her assessment with her fundamental commitment is noteworthy:

. . . Freedom of the press, the rights of association and assembly all have been outlawed for all opponents of the Soviet regime . . . on the other hand, it is a well-known and indisputable fact that without a free and untrammelled press, without the unlimited right of

association and assembly, the rule of the broad mass of the people is entirely unthinkable.

When the pamphlet was published posthumously, it gave rise to considerable polemics. The Communists denounced its "errors," and the Socialists hailed it as a remarkably incisive indictment of the Bolshevik regime. In his judicious comments on the pamphlet, Nettl may be right in warning against those who want to use it as a weapon against communism. For Luxemburg had not intended primarily to assess the Russian revolution, but to develop a general critique of the very notion of socialist revolution. Moreover, it was her conviction that the impending revolution in the West would make terror unnecessary in Russia. Still, it may be legitimate to speculate, on the basis of the pamphlet, that German "communism" would have been substantially different from the Russian form had Luxemburg's life not ended so prematurely.

IN ADDITION TO presenting a vivid portrait of Luxemburg, Nettl offers interesting interpretations of various aspects of Polish and German socialism. His frequent judgments about the views and personal traits of leading Socialists add considerable color to his account, and his comparisons between the positions of Luxemburg and those of her comrades raise his heroine's work into sharp relief. Nettl's study is so well-researched that it may seem churlish to question him on a detail, but his suggestion that Plekhanov was strongly anti-Semitic is too serious to be ignored. Nettl cites no evidence to support his charge, and from what we know about Plekhanov, it seems highly unlikely that the accusation can be substantiated. His wife was Jewish, as were some of his most intimate collaborators.

In sum, Mr. Nettl's work is a valuable addition to the growing list of studies on Marxism. If he has identified too much with his heroine, if he has been too ready to accept as relevant for our own day the somewhat mystical belief of Rosa Luxemburg in the "creative force of mass action," he has abundantly demonstrated that she was one of the nobler, more admirable and important leaders of European Marxism in the 20th century.

Yugoslavia in Transition

DAVID TORNQUIST: *Look East, Look West; The Socialist Adventure in Yugoslavia.*
New York, MacMillan Co.; London, Collier-MacMillan Ltd., 1966.

Reviewed by Anthony Sylvester

THIS BOOK PROVIDES good background reading on the conflict and tensions in Yugoslavia between reformers and liberally-minded Communists on the one hand and diehard dogmatists and power-hungry bureaucrats on the other. The conflict, which has now led to a major shakeup in Belgrade, is not an isolated phenomenon. It has occurred all over the Communist world, and some of Mr. Tornquist's observations might apply to any Communist country, at any time since the Russian Revolution.

To a small extent, but certainly to a larger degree than any other Communist country, Yugoslavia is ruled by the consent of the governed. Yet, as Mr. Tornquist points out: ". . . the party is not the people," and it is precisely the power, organization and methods of the Yugoslav League of Communists that have blurred and frustrated the Yugoslav vision of democracy. He does try, however, to see the good, wherever possible, in the Yugoslav experiment in industrial democracy.

The author bases his observations on his two year sojourn in Yugoslavia where he worked as a translator, learned Serbo-Croatian, and adopted as nearly as possible a Yugoslav standard of living. He attended meetings of workers' councils, housing committees, pre-election meetings, battled to secure a flat for himself and his wife, and got to know first hand the underhanded methods of people in authority and all the little pressures and intrigues that go with everyday life in a Communist country.

The most illuminating chapters of the book deal with the system of workers' self-management. In

describing the workers' administration of a publishing house, a hospital and a drug factory, among others, Tornquist makes the point that Yugoslav industrial democracy works only under strictly circumscribed conditions. For example, a director can and often does manipulate the workers' authority and get his own way, provided he works hand in glove with the party organization in the enterprise. But he must be "a politician on all sides." In addition, there are strict legal provisions regulating the distribution of profits and the fixing of employees' incomes. During the author's stay, one director actually was appointed by the local authorities, a procedure which has since been changed, formally at any rate, to permit the workers' councils of each enterprise to appoint its director. In practice, however, the local authorities no doubt continue to play a large role in the nominating process.

Workers' councils do exercise real power in labor relations. No employee can be discharged without the approval of the council, for example. In this connection, Tornquist notes that a kind of workingmen's solidarity often develops when layoffs are threatened. Workers' councils as a rule tend to oppose layoffs even when these may be necessary for economic reasons. Indeed, one of the crucial problems of the Yugoslav economy today, and a reason for Yugoslavia's persistent inability to pay her way in the world, is precisely the excessive number of uneconomic enterprises which employ more workers than they need.

The case of the Galenika drug factory provides a