

Rosa Luxemburg

The Crisis of German Social Democracy (the "*Junius Pamphlet*," 1915)

Chapter 1

The scene has changed fundamentally. The six weeks' march to Paris has grown into a world drama. [1] Mass slaughter has become the tiresome and monotonous business of the day and the end is no closer. Bourgeois statecraft is held fast in its own vise. The spirits summoned up can no longer be exorcised.

Gone is the euphoria. Gone the patriotic noise in the streets, the chase after the gold-colored automobile, one false telegram after another, the wells poisoned by cholera, the Russian students heaving bombs over every railway bridge in Berlin, the French airplanes over Nuremberg, the spy hunting public running amok in the streets, the swaying crowds in the coffee shops with ear-deafening patriotic songs surging ever higher, whole city neighborhoods transformed into mobs ready to denounce, to mistreat women, to shout hurrah and to induce delirium in themselves by means of wild rumors. Gone, too, is the atmosphere of ritual murder, the Kishinev air where the crossing guard is the only remaining representative of human dignity. [2]

The spectacle is over. German scholars, those "stumbling lemurs," have been whistled off the stage long ago. The trains full of reservists are no longer accompanied by virgins fainting from pure jubilation. They no longer greet the people from the windows of the train with joyous smiles. Carrying their packs, they quietly trot along the streets where the public goes about its daily business with aggrieved visages.

In the prosaic atmosphere of pale day there sounds a different chorus - the hoarse cries of the vulture and the hyenas of the battlefield. Ten thousand tarpaulins guaranteed up to regulations! A hundred thousand kilos of bacon, cocoa powder, coffee-substitute - c.o.d., immediate delivery! Hand grenades, lathes, cartridge pouches, marriage bureaus for widows of the fallen, leather belts, jobbers for war orders - serious offers only! The cannon fodder loaded onto trains in August and September is moldering in the killing fields of Belgium, the Vosges, and Masurian Lakes where the profits are springing up like weeds. It's a question of getting the harvest into the barn quickly. Across the ocean stretch thousands of greedy hands to snatch it up.

Business thrives in the ruins. Cities become piles of ruins; villages become cemeteries; countries, deserts; populations are beggared; churches, horse stalls. International law, treaties and alliances, the most sacred words and the highest authority have been torn in shreds. Every sovereign "by the grace of God" is called a rogue and lying scoundrel by his cousin on the other side. Every diplomat is a cunning rascal to his colleagues in the other party. Every government sees every other as dooming its own people and worthy only of universal contempt. There are food riots in Venice, in Lisbon, Moscow, Singapore. There is plague in Russia, and misery and despair everywhere.

Violated, dishonored, wading in blood, dripping filth - there stands bourgeois society. This is it [in reality]. Not all spic and span and moral, with pretense to culture, philosophy, ethics, order, peace, and the rule of law - but the ravening beast, the witches' sabbath of anarchy, a plague to culture and humanity. Thus it reveals itself in its true, its naked form.

In the midst of this witches' sabbath a catastrophe of world-historical proportions has happened: International Social Democracy has capitulated. To deceive ourselves about it, to cover it up, would be the most foolish, the most fatal thing the proletariat could do. Marx says: "...the democrat (that is, the petty bourgeois revolutionary) [comes] out of the most shameful defeats as unmarked as he naively went into them; he comes away with the newly gained conviction that he must be victorious, not that he or his party ought to give up the old principles, but that conditions ought to accommodate him." [3] The modern proletariat comes out of historical tests differently. Its tasks and its errors are both gigantic: no prescription, no schema valid for every case, no infallible leader to show it the path to follow. Historical experience is its only school mistress. Its thorny way to self-emancipation is paved not only with immeasurable suffering but also with countless errors. The aim of its journey - its emancipation depends on this - is whether the proletariat can learn from its own errors. Self-criticism, remorseless, cruel, and going to the core of things is the life's breath and light of the proletarian movement. The fall of the socialist proletariat in the present world war is unprecedented. It is a misfortune for humanity. But socialism will be lost only if the international proletariat fails to measure the depth of this fall, if it refuses to learn from it.

The last forty-five year period in the development of the modern labor movement now stands in doubt. What we are experiencing in this critique is a closing of accounts for what will soon be half a century of work at our posts. The grave of the Paris Commune ended the first phase of the European labor movement as well as the First International. [4] Since then there began a new phase. In place of spontaneous revolutions, risings, and barricades, after which the proletariat each time fell back into passivity, there began the systematic daily struggle, the exploitation of bourgeois parliamentarianism, mass organizations, the marriage of the economic with the political struggle, and that of socialist ideals with stubborn defense of immediate daily interests. For the first time the polestar of strict scientific teachings lit the way for the proletariat and for its emancipation. Instead of sects, schools, utopias, and isolated experiments in various countries, there arose a uniform, international theoretical basis which bound countries together like the strands of a rope. Marxist knowledge gave the working class of the entire world a compass by which it can make sense of the welter of daily events and by which it can always plot the right course to take to the fixed and final goal.

She who bore, championed, and protected this new method was German Social Democracy. The [Franco-Prussian] War and the defeat of the Paris Commune had shifted the center of gravity for the European workers' movement to Germany. As France was the classic site of the first phase of proletarian class struggle and Paris the beating, bleeding heart of the European laboring classes of those times, so the German workers became the vanguard of the second phase. By means of countless sacrifices and tireless attention to detail, they have built the strongest organization, the one most worthy of emulation; they created the biggest press, called the most effective means of education and enlightenment into being, gathered the most powerful masses of voters and attained the greatest number of parliamentary mandates. German Social Democracy was

considered the purest embodiment of Marxist socialism. She had and laid claim to a special place in the Second International - its instructress and leader. [5]

In his famous 1895 foreword to Marx's *The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850*, Friedrich Engels wrote:

"No matter what happens in other countries, German Social Democracy has a special position and therefore a special task, at least for the time being. The two million voters it sends to the ballot box, and the young men and women who, although non-voters, stand behind them, constitute the most numerous and compact mass, the "decisive force" of the proletarian army.

German Social Democracy, as the Vienna *Arbeiterzeitung* wrote on August 5, 1914, was "the jewel of class-conscious proletarian organizations." In her footsteps trod the increasingly enthusiastic Social Democrats of France, Italy, and Belgium, the labor movements of Holland, Scandinavia, Switzerland, and the United States. The Slavic countries, the Russians, the Social Democrats of the Balkans looked upon [German Social Democracy] with limitless, nearly uncritical, admiration. In the Second International the German "decisive force" played the determining role. At the [international] congresses, in the meetings of the international socialist bureaus, all awaited the opinion of the Germans. Especially in the questions of the struggle against militarism and war, German Social Democracy always took the lead. "For us Germans that is unacceptable" regularly sufficed to decide the orientation of the Second International, which blindly bestowed its confidence upon the admired leadership of the mighty German Social Democracy: the pride of every socialist and the terror of the ruling classes everywhere.

And what did we in Germany experience when the great historical test came? The most precipitous fall, the most violent collapse. Nowhere has the organization of the proletariat been yoked so completely to the service of imperialism. Nowhere is the state of siege borne so docilely. [6] Nowhere is the press so hobbled, public opinion so stifled, the economic and political class struggle of the working class so totally surrendered as in Germany.

But German Social Democracy was not merely the strongest vanguard troop, it was the thinking head of the International. For this reason, we must begin the analysis, the self-examination process, with its fall. It has the duty to begin the salvation of international socialism, that means unsparing criticism of itself. None of the other parties, none of the other classes of bourgeois society, may look clearly and openly into the mirror of their own errors, their own weaknesses, for the mirror reflects their historical limitations and the historical doom that awaits them. The working class can boldly look truth straight in the face, even the bitterest self-renunciation, for its weaknesses are only confusion. The strict law of history gives back its power, stands guarantee for its final victory.

Unsparing self-criticism is not merely an essential for its existence but the working class' supreme duty. On our ship we have the most valuable treasures of mankind, and the proletariat is their ordained guardian! And while bourgeois society, shamed and dishonored by the bloody orgy, rushes headlong toward its doom, the international proletariat must and will gather up the golden treasure that, in a moment of weakness and confusion in the chaos of the world war, it has allowed to sink to the ground.

One thing is certain. The world war is a turning point. It is foolish and mad to imagine that we need only survive the war, like a rabbit waiting out the storm under a bush, in order to fall happily back into the old routine once it is over. The world war has altered the conditions of our struggle and, most of all, it has changed us. Not that the basic law of capitalist development, the life-and-death war between capital and labor, will experience any amelioration. But now, in the midst of the war, the masks are falling and the old familiar visages smirk at us. The tempo of development has received a mighty jolt from the eruption of the volcano of imperialism. The violence of the conflicts in the bosom of society, the enormousness of the tasks that tower up before the socialist proletariat - these make everything that has transpired in the history of the workers' movement seem a pleasant idyll.

Historically, this war was ordained to thrust forward the cause of the proletariat....It was ordained to drive the German proletariat to the pinnacle of the nation and thereby begin to organize the international and universal conflict between capital and labor for political power within the state.

And did we envision a different role for the working class in the world war? Let us recall how we, only a short while ago, were accustomed to describe the future:

Then comes the *catastrophe*. Then the great mobilization will take place in Europe; 16-18 million men, the flower of the various nations, armed with the best tools of death, will enter the field as enemies. But, I am convinced, that behind the great mobilization there stands the *great havoc*. It will not come through our agency, but rather yours. You are driving things to the limit. You are leading us to catastrophe. You will reap what you have sown. The *Gotterdammerung of the bourgeois world approaches. Believe it! It is approaching!* [All italics are Luxemburg's.]

Thus spoke our leader, [August] Bebel [7], during the Reichstag debate on the Morocco Crisis.

Imperialism or Socialism?, the official party pamphlet distributed in hundreds of thousands of copies a few years ago, closes with these words:

Thus the struggle against imperialism develops ever more into the decisive struggle between capital and labor. War crises, rising prices, capitalism vs. peace, welfare for all, socialism! Thus is the question stated. *History is moving toward great decisions*. The proletariat must work unceasingly at its world-historical task, strengthen its organization, the clarity of its understanding. Then come what may, be it that [proletarian] power spares mankind the terrible cruelty of a world war, *or be it that the capitalist world sinks into history in the same way as it was born, in blood and violence. [In either case] the historical hour will find the working class prepared - and preparation is everything.* [All italics are Luxemburg's.]

The official *Handbook for Social-Democratic Voters* (1911), for the last Reichstag election, says on p. 42 concerning the expected world war:

Do our rulers and ruling classes expect the peoples to permit this awful thing? Will not a cry of horror, of scorn, of outrage not seize the peoples and cause them to put an end to this murder? Will they not ask: For whom? what's it all for? Are we mentally disturbed to be treated this way,

to allow ourselves to be so treated? He who is calmly convinced of the probability of a great European war can come to no other conclusion than the following: The next European war will be such a desperate gamble as the world *has never seen. In all probability it will be the last war.*

With speeches and words such as these, our current Reichstag deputies acquired their 110 mandates.

In the summer of 1911, when the *Panther* made its lunge to Agadir [8] and the noisy agitation of the German imperialists put war in the immediate offing, an international meeting in London accepted the following resolution (August 4, 1911):

The delegates of the German, Spanish, English, Dutch, and French workers' organizations declare themselves *to be ready to oppose any declaration of war with all the means at their disposal.* Every represented nation undertakes the obligation, according to the resolutions of national and international congresses, *to act* against all criminal machinations of the ruling classes.

When, in November 1912, the congress of the International met in the minster at Basel and when the long procession of worker representatives entered the cathedral, everyone present felt a presentiment of the greatness of the coming destiny and a heroic resolve.

The cool, skeptical Victor Adler spoke:

Comrades, the most important thing is that we are here at the common source of our strength, that we can draw from this strength so that each can do in his own country what he can, according to the forms and means that we have, to oppose the crime of war with all the power we possess. And if it can be stopped, if it is really stopped, *then we must see to it that it becomes a cornerstone for the end* [of bourgeois society]. This is the moving spirit for the whole International. And if murder and arson and pestilence are unleashed throughout civilized Europe - we can only think of this with horror, outrage and indignation churning in our breasts. *And we ask ourselves: are we men, are the proletarians of today still sheep* that they can be led dumbly to slaughter?....

And [Jean] Jaures concluded the reading of the International Bureau's manifesto against the war with these words:

The International represents all the moral force of the world! And if the tragic hour strikes and we must give ourselves up to it, the consciousness of this will support and strengthen us. We do not merely say "no" *but from the depth of our hearts we declare ourselves ready to sacrifice everything.*

It was reminiscent of the Oath of Ruetli. [9] The world directed its gaze to the church at Basel where the bell sounded solemnly for the future great battle between the army of labor and the power of capital....

Even a week before the outbreak of war, on July 26, 1914, German party newspapers wrote:

We are not marionettes. We combat with all our energy a system that makes men into will-less tools of blind circumstance, this capitalism that seeks to transform a Europe thirsting for peace into a steaming slaughterhouse. If destruction has its way, if the united will to peace of the German, the international proletariat, which will make itself known in powerful demonstrations in the coming days, if the world war cannot be fended off, then at least this should be the last war, it should become the Gotterdammerung of capitalism. (Frankfurter Volksstimme)

Then on July 30, 1914, the central organ of German Social Democracy stated:

The socialist proletariat rejects any responsibility for the events being brought about by a blinded, a maddened ruling class. Let it be known that *a new life shall bloom from the ruins. All responsibility falls to the wielders of power today!* It is "to be or not to be!" "World-history is the world-court!"

And then came the unheard of, the unprecedented, the 4th of August 1914.

Did it have to come? An event of this scope is certainly no game of chance. It must have deep and wide-reaching objective causes. These causes can, however, also lie in the errors of the leader of the proletariat, the Social Democrats, in the waning of our fighting spirit, our courage, and loyalty to our convictions. Scientific socialism has taught us to comprehend the objective laws of historical development. Men do not make history according to their own free will. But they make history nonetheless. Proletarian action is dependent upon the degree of maturity in social development. However, social development is not independent of the proletariat but is equally its driving force and cause, its effect and consequence. [Proletarian] action participates in history. And while we can as little skip a stage of historical development as escape our shadow, we can certainly accelerate or retard history.

Socialism is the first popular movement in world history that has set itself the goal of bringing human consciousness, and thereby free will, into play in the social actions of mankind. For this reason, Friedrich Engels designated the final victory of the socialist proletariat a leap of humanity from the animal world into the realm of freedom. This "leap" is also an iron law of history bound to the thousands of seeds of a prior torment-filled and all-too-slow development. But this can never be realized until the development of complex material conditions strikes the incendiary spark of conscious will in the great masses. The victory of socialism will not descend from heaven. It can only be won by a long chain of violent tests of strength between the old and the new powers. The international proletariat under the leadership of the Social Democrats will thereby learn to try to take its history into its own hands; instead of remaining a will-less football, it will take the tiller of social life and become the pilot to the goal of its own history.

Friedrich Engels once said: "Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism." What does "regression into barbarism" mean to our lofty European civilization? Until now, we have all probably read and repeated these words thoughtlessly, without suspecting their fearsome seriousness. A look around us at this moment shows what the regression of bourgeois society into barbarism means. This world war is a regression into barbarism. The triumph of imperialism leads to the annihilation of civilization. At

first, this happens sporadically for the duration of a modern war, but then when the period of unlimited wars begins it progresses toward its inevitable consequences. Today, we face the choice exactly as Friedrich Engels foresaw it a generation ago: either the triumph of imperialism and the collapse of all civilization as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration - a great cemetery. Or the victory of socialism, that means the conscious active struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism and its method of war. This is a dilemma of world history, an either/or; the scales are wavering before the decision of the class-conscious proletariat. The future of civilization and humanity depends on whether or not the proletariat resolves manfully to throw its revolutionary broadsword into the scales. In this war imperialism has won. Its bloody sword of genocide has brutally tilted the scale toward the abyss of misery. The only compensation for all the misery and all the shame would be if we learn from the war how the proletariat can seize mastery of its own destiny and escape the role of the lackey to the ruling classes.

Dearly bought is the modern working class' understanding of its historical vocation. Its emancipation as a class is sown with fearful sacrifices, a veritable path to Golgotha. The June days, the sacrifice of the Commune, the martyrs of the Russian Revolution - a dance of bloody shadows without number. [10] All fell on the field of honor. They are, as Marx wrote about the heroes of the Commune, eternally "enshrined in the great heart of the working class." Now, millions of proletarians of all tongues fall upon the field of dishonor, of fratricide, lacerating themselves while the song of the slave is on their lips. This, too, we are not spared. We are like the Jews that Moses led through the desert. But we are not lost, and we will be victorious if we have not unlearned how to learn. And if the present leaders of the proletariat, the Social Democrats, do not understand how to learn, then they will go under "to make room for people capable of dealing with a new world."

Notes:

1. Six weeks was the time allotted for victory on the Western Front by the Schlieffen Plan. The general staff was forced to scrap the plan in October 1914, as the war of movement swiftly evolved into grinding trench warfare.
2. For three days in April 1903, Kishinev, the provincial capital of Bessarabia in the Russian Empire, was the scene of an anti-Jewish riot. According to an official report, more than fifty Jews were killed and over five hundred injured; hundreds of homes and shops were plundered and vandalized. Local authorities supported antisemitic organizations and deliberately maximized the carnage by holding back on the use of force to reestablish order. Luxemburg here uses the reference to the Kishinev pogrom and to "ritual murder" - the medieval belief that Jews used the blood of Christians, usually children, for ritual purposes - as the nadir of civilization.
3. Quoting Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852).

4. At the close of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, besieged Paris revolted against the regular French government (sitting in Bordeaux). For ten weeks representatives of the working class, organized as the Commune, ruled "the capital of Europe" with an efficiency and fairness that surprised and disturbed the propertied classes all over Europe. Recouping its forces, the elected French government retook Paris in street-by-street fighting marked by wanton atrocities and destruction of property on both sides. The First International, founded by Karl Marx in 1864, was falsely accused of fomenting the Commune. Its true purpose was to unite working class parties in pursuit of the revolutionary goals first outlined in the Communist Manifesto (1848). But doctrinal divisions and factionalism paralyzed the organization which met for the last time in Philadelphia in 1874.

5. The successor to the First International, the Second took form in 1889 and recruited most of the Social Democratic parties of Europe from its central offices in Brussels. World War I destroyed the viability of the organization, although it continued to function as the voice of moderate socialists as opposed to the more radical communist parties arrayed in Lenin's Third International or Comintern (1919-43).

6. With mobilization at the outbreak of the war, the role of the civilian sector in Germany shrank continually. The country was divided into defense sectors and commanding generals within these took over all the functions of government; they could suspend civil rights, arrest individuals under the guise of protective custody, and exercise considerable powers of censorship. Thus they were able to stifle dissent and particularly to restrict news of the military failures.

7. August Bebel (1840-1913) , a rarity in the leadership of the European socialist movement, an authentic worker, single-handedly organized the Marxist branch of the German labor movement in the 1860s and then guided it until his death. The Second Morocco Crisis of 1911 aroused fears of imminent European war. The crisis resolution entailed Germany's recognition of a French protectorate in exchange for a large, relatively worthless strip of French Equatorial Africa. While Britain strongly supported its French ally, Germany had had to back down when its own allies showed clear unwillingness to go to war on behalf of overseas interests. Nationalists at home regarded the outcome as a humiliation, further proof that the kaiser's government was incapable of directing the drive for world power. Leftists saw the crisis as ominous proof of the intentions of militarists and imperialists.

8. Sending the German gunboat, Panther, to Agadir, a port in Morocco, was the Kaiser's way of announcing his intention of protecting German interests. The symbolic attempt to preempt French designs on erecting a protectorate over Morocco was seen as a provocation and helped the conflict in interest escalate into a full-blown crisis.

9. According to legend, Wilhelm Tell and representatives of three Swiss cantons met at Ruetli in 1307 to pledge resistance against Austrian tyranny, the traditional foundation of Swiss freedom.

10. In June 1848, four months after the revolutionary overthrow of the Orleanist monarchy in France, the conservative bourgeoisie regained control of Paris amid street-fighting and great bloodshed. The defeat of the Parisian communards in June 1871 by regular French forces was accompanied by mass executions and later deportations. The Russian revolution referred to by Luxemburg took place in 1905. Briefly, working class soviets (councils) controlled St. Petersburg and Moscow, but tsarist forces were able to quell the revolutionaries and reestablish a somewhat modified autocracy.

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