

The Rosa Luxemburg Myth: A Critique of Luxemburg's Politics in Poland (1893–1919)

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Abstract

This article challenges widespread uncritical portrayals of Rosa Luxemburg. By examining the politics and practices of Luxemburg and her SDKPiL party in Poland, I show that their commitment to proletarian emancipation was undermined by sectarian and doctrinaire tendencies that contributed to the defeat of Poland's workers' revolutions in 1905 and 1918–19. A critical analysis of their approaches to the national question, the Polish Socialist Party, German Social Democracy, and the role of the revolutionary party, undermines the prevailing romanticisation of Luxemburg. I argue that the Polish Socialist Party, Luxemburg's main political rival, posed a viable Marxist alternative for Poland's revolutionary movement.

Keywords

Rosa Luxemburg – Marxism – national liberation – the Polish Socialist Party – the German Social-Democratic Party – Leninism – the revolutionary party

Rosa Luxemburg's contributions to the revolutionary movement and the development of Marxism are undeniably important. Yet many writers today uncritically romanticise Luxemburg as a humanistic, undogmatic, and democratic alternative to Social Democracy, Leninism, and/or Stalinism. Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, for example, argues that Luxemburg 'inaugurated the heritage of

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an alternative understanding of Marxism with a revolutionary humanist face, as distinct from liberalism, social democratic revisionism as well as Stalinist authoritarianism. It is through the lens of Rosa Luxemburg that it is possible to understand what went wrong with Soviet socialism and how we can reposition our understanding of socialism in the twenty-first century.¹ In William Pelz's recent call for a 'rebirth of Luxemburgism', Luxemburg is presented as a flawless thinker and activist whose stances on democracy, humanism, internationalism, mass participation, and revolutionary parties constitute a vital bedrock 'for those who would follow her in the twenty-first century'.²

In addition to reflecting current political and academic climates, such interpretations tend to reflect a focus on Luxemburg's contributions in Germany, to the exclusion of her much more problematic role in Poland's socialist movement. On the basis of my research in Polish archives and libraries, the present article challenges the widespread idealisation of Luxemburg by examining the politics and practices of Luxemburg and her party, the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL) in Poland.³ A critical analysis of this often-overlooked history also necessarily requires a major reassessment of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), Luxemburg's main political rival. Though the PPS is usually dismissed as a 'nationalist' organisation, I will argue that it represented a viable revolutionary Marxist alternative in the Polish workers' movement.

Three specific myths about Luxemburg serve as the starting point for our discussion. First, contrary to the common claim that Luxemburg was a 'national nihilist', this article demonstrates that her orientation significantly reflected Polish national sentiments, both positive and negative. Only after 1914 did Luxemburg's opposition to national independence become a major political liability – in the preceding period, her most problematic stance was a needlessly hostile approach to the PPS.

Second, while Luxemburg is usually portrayed as the earliest Marxist to challenge the reformism of the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD), I show

1 Gupta 2012, p. 17.

2 Pelz 2007, p. 4. Though he is sceptical of what he considers to be Luxemburg's outdated attachments to revolutionary Marxism, Stephen Bronner similarly calls for 'appropriating her legacy' today, as Luxemburg 'remains the most important representative of a libertarian socialist tradition inspired by internationalism, economic justice, and a radical belief in democracy.' (Bronner 2013, p. 12.).

3 The research for this article was conducted primarily at the Czytelnia Wydziału Zbiorów Historii Społecznej–Biblioteka Sejmowa, the Archiwum Akt Nowych, and the Biblioteka Narodowa and its Dokumenty życia społecznego collection in Warsaw, as well as at the Bibliothèque Polonaise in Paris.

that PPS Marxists in 1904 wrote the world's first major critiques of the SPD and its top theoretician Karl Kautsky. Ironically, the impetus for this PPS critique was the campaign by Luxemburg, in alliance with the conservative SPD leadership, against the organisational and political autonomy of Polish socialists in Germany.

Third, this article challenges the myth that Luxemburg supported 'spontaneism' and consistent party democracy. The SDKPiL's perspectives and practices demonstrate that there were no steady strategic differences between Luxemburg and V.I. Lenin on the role of a revolutionary party. In practice, the most consequential divergence between their parties was that the Bolsheviks, unlike the SDKPiL, became more effective in mass workers' struggles during and following the 1905 revolution.

A comprehensive assessment of Luxemburg's politics and theorising in general is beyond the scope of this paper. To be sure, the importance of Luxemburg as a Marxist theorist does not necessarily hinge on one's assessment of the political practice of her party in Poland – critiquing the latter need not lead us to dismiss the continued relevance of much of her voluminous literary output. Yet since Luxemburg was also always a political militant, it is fair to assess her from this often-neglected angle.

As a critique of Luxemburg's most problematic interventions, this article admittedly does not focus on her many strongpoints, which include a dedication to revolutionary Marxism, internationalism, anti-militarism, and working-class self-activity.⁴ These strengths demand recognition, both in fairness to Luxemburg's legacy, and because they help explain why so many militants adhered to her perspectives and leadership for so long. The tragedy of Luxemburg and her Polish party was that their commitment to proletarian emancipation was undercut by sectarian and doctrinaire tendencies that contributed to the defeat of Poland's workers' revolutions in 1905 and 1918–19.

The National Question and the Polish Socialist Party

A serious critique of Luxemburg and the SDKPiL need not repeat the common myth that they rejected all national sentiments and demands.⁵ For instance, Trevor Erlacher claims that 'only Rosa Luxemburg among the major figures of early twentieth-century Marxism in Eastern Europe held to the position of "national nihilism" that Marx and Engels had first hinted at in *The Communist*

4 For a useful overview of these contributions, see Luxemburg 2010.

5 Until 1899 Luxemburg's party was named the SDKP – i.e., it did not mention Lithuania.

Manifesto. Luxemburg opposed any intrusion of national politics, sentiments, and identities into the international workers' movement.⁶ Krzysztof Tyszka's recent monograph likewise accuses Luxemburg of 'national nihilism' and lambasts her 'negative attitude to all forms of national struggle'.⁷ Numerous other writers have repeated such claims, which misjudge the real issues at stake and obscure the actual political weaknesses of Luxemburg and her party.⁸

In reality, neither Luxemburg nor the SDKPiL – in which she was the main theoretician and political leader – were national nihilists regarding Poland. Rather, they argued that national freedom for Poles could only be won in alliance with the other workers living under the three states (Russia, Austria, and Prussia-Germany) that in the 1790s had partitioned Poland, wiping it off the European map. In the July 1893 first issue of the party's paper, *Sprawa Robotnicza* [*The Workers' Cause*], Luxemburg declared that 'here, as elsewhere, the worker is the only defender of every kind of freedom – economic, political, national.'⁹ In response to the government's Germanisation drive in Prussian Poland, Luxemburg wrote a 1900 pamphlet *W obronie narodowości* [*In Defence of Nationality*] to promote the defence of Polish culture:

So it is a crime to speak in one's own language, which you have taken in with your mother's milk – so it is a criminal offence to belong to a people, into which you were born. Truly, it is high time for the Polish people to shake off its lifelessness, to express its indignation, to rise to fight against Germanisation. How to lead this fight, which path is the most effective to defend the Polish nationality – these are questions that merit serious consideration.¹⁰

Hardly a national nihilist, Luxemburg often shared the widespread assumption among Poles that they were more 'European' than other national groups in Russia. German historian Georg Strobel notes that a conception of Poland's relatively advanced social structure, 'developed in the "internationalist" Rosa Luxemburg a seemingly anachronistic Polish social-chauvinism, which broke through again and again especially with regard to Russia, Russians and their

6 Erlacher 2014, p. 528.

7 Tyszka 2004, pp. 64–5.

8 See, for example, Croan 1992, p. 348.

9 'O Wynaradanianiu (z Powodu Dziesięciolecia Rządów Gen. Gub. Hurki)' [1893], in Buczek and Tych (eds.) 1957, p. 9.

10 Luxemburg 1900, pp. 1–2.

social-democratic organisations, parties, and workers' councils, as well as towards Jews'.¹¹

Along these lines, Luxemburg criticised the 'Tatar-Mongolian savagery' of the Bolsheviks.¹² Luxemburg argued that while Poles were socially and culturally developed enough to require national autonomy, the same was not true for the 'backwards' Ukrainians, Belorussians, Jews, Georgians, Armenians and Tatars (Muslims).¹³ Similarly, Luxemburg and the SDKPiL systematically opposed distributing land to peasants, arguing that such a demand was unnecessary given Poland's level of capitalist development.¹⁴

Though Luxemburg and the SDKPiL advocated equality for all nationalities, fought the pogromists, opposed antisemitism, and were denounced by right-wingers for being Jewish-led, their approach towards Jews in Poland was sometimes problematic.¹⁵ Luxemburg, who herself was an assimilated (Polonised) Jew, on multiple occasions resorted to antisemitic insults and stereotypes, such as comparing the Jewish Bundists to sugar speculators at the 1907 congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party (RSDRP).¹⁶ During the widespread 1911–12 campaign of Polish workers to keep Jews out of mechanised factories, the SDKPiL, adhering to a rigid assimilationism, tended to side with the Polish workers and publicly placed much of the blame for the conflict on the Jewish refusal to assimilate.¹⁷

Luxemburg's adaptation to Polish national sentiments, both positive and negative, raises important questions about her well-known opposition to

11 Strobel 1974, p. 345.

12 '10.VIII.1909' [1909], in Luxemburg 1971, p. 46.

13 Luxemburg 1908b.

14 Continued adherence to this position after 1917 proved to be almost as damaging to early Polish Communism as its stance on the national question. While the PPS-Revolutionary Faction and various radical Polish populist parties won massive rural support by calling for expropriating the landed estates and giving land to the peasants, the SDKPiL and the early Polish Communist party rejected the latter demand as bourgeois and contrary to socio-economic progress. Thus the Provisional Revolutionary Government – headed primarily by former SDKPiL leaders – established during the Bolsheviks' 1920 invasion of Poland opposed distributing confiscated lands to the peasants. For a self-critique by a former SDKPiL leader acknowledging that the Polish Communist party's early agrarian and national policies paved the way for the Polish revolution's defeat, see Warski 1966, pp. 609–11.

15 On Luxemburg's Jewish background and her opposition to antisemitism, see Castle 2012.

16 On this incident and Luxemburg's other 'hostile' stances on Jews, see Rauba 2005, pp. 177–80.

17 Strobel 1974, pp. 461–2; Weinstock 1984, pp. 234–5.

Polish independence and the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), as this stance cannot be explained by (a non-existent) national nihilism. A sense of historic context is important here. Although Poland regained its independence in 1918, it would be wrong to assume that most Poles saw independence as a necessary and/or achievable goal during the preceding decades. After the defeat of the 1863–4 noble-led Polish uprising, the struggle for secession became widely seen as outdated in both liberal and radical circles. Poland's first Marxist party – the Proletariat, founded in 1882 – had famously rejected Karl Marx's advocacy of Polish independence as a rampart of Western democracy against Tsarist despotism.

While separatist sentiment was widespread among the Polish intelligentsia, it was far from clear whether the demand for independence would be supported by the working class, whose national consciousness was far more heterogeneous and ambiguous. As Luxemburg had incessantly predicted since her party's founding in 1893, the general trend during the 1905 revolution in Poland was towards unity with Russia and Russian revolutionaries. Though the pro-independence PPS became Poland's largest political formation, secession remained at most a secondary and distant goal for Polish parties (including for the PPS majority); moreover, the ranks of the SDKPiL also massively swelled during 1905–7.¹⁸ It was only during the social and political upheaval of World War One, the German occupation of Russian Poland, and the collapse of the Russian, German and Austrian empires, that the struggle for independence became an immediate possibility and gained massive popular support.¹⁹

The problem was that Luxemburg went beyond arguing that Marxists should not call for Polish independence. She elaborated a rigid theory that Polish independence was an absolute historic impossibility, because of the 'organic integration' (socio-economic incorporation) of Polish territories into Russia, Germany, and Austria. The demand for Polish independence was inherently reactionary and nationalist, thus it could never be supported by Marxists.²⁰ Significantly, this stance was rejected by an important wing of the early SDKPiL, which saw Polish independence as a possible and positive

18 Apart from two brief periods – 1892–4 and 1907–10, during which both parties were very small – the PPS (PPS-Left after 1906) was numerically larger and more influential than Luxemburg's party.

19 On World War One as the turning point in the 'Polish question', see Biskupski 1990. For the impact of the First World War on Polish Marxists, see Tych 1960 and Najdus 1980.

20 Key works by Luxemburg on the Polish national question include Luxemburg 1977 [1898] and Luxemburg (ed.) 1905. For a general overview of her stance on the national question, see Rauba 2005.

long-term objective.²¹ But from 1903 onwards the SDKPiL was firmly committed to Luxemburg's stance, which prevented it from flexibly adjusting to the major changes in the Polish national struggle that came after 1914.

In the years preceding World War One, the most questionable aspect of Luxemburg's stance was her extreme hostility to the Polish Socialist Party – indeed, the politics of Luxemburg and her party was largely defined by their opposition to the PPS and its call for Polish independence. Luxemburg's party was born in 1893 as a split from the PPS, and the ensuing factional dynamic certainly played a critical role in the evolution of both parties.²² Unfortunately, much of the historiography has uncritically accepted Luxemburg's claim that the PPS was a 'nationalist' party. For example, one socialist author writes:

The attitude of the Polish Social Democrats stemmed in part from the fact that the reform Polish socialists who belonged to the Polish Socialist Party (PSP) [*sic*] considered that the struggle for Poland's national independence from Russia took precedence over every other struggle, including the class struggle. According to the PSP, the struggle of Polish workers for their own emancipation needed to remain secondary because it threatened to disrupt the unity of the Polish people. Thus the Polish Social Democrats correctly maintained that the PSP had betrayed the interests of the international working class.²³

As such allegations distort the actual orientation of the PPS, it is necessary to outline the trajectory of Luxemburg and her party's political rival.

21 This dynamic reached a high point between 1900 and 1902, when followers of Luxemburg and her line on the national question and the PPS became a minority inside the newly re-founded SDKPiL (in 1896 the original party had been completely destroyed inside of Poland by repression). Thus the 1900 Leipzig party conference announced that the party 'does not renounce Polish independence', and resolved not to distribute Luxemburg's 1895 pamphlet against Polish independence. ('Zjazd Zagranicznych Grup SD w Lipsku' [1900], in Szmidt (ed.) 1934, pp. 176–7.) Similarly, the November 1901 SDKPiL congress in Warsaw resolved that it 'fully recognised the principle of national independence', but that it did not raise the independence demand in its programme because 'at the present no one can predict the stages of political development of Poland and Lithuania'. ('[III] Zjazdu Socjaldemokratycznej Partji Królestwa Polskiego i Litwy' [1901], in Szmidt (ed.) 1934, p. 275.) This brief period came to an end when the Tsarist police arrested most of the SDKPiL's new leadership in 1902.

22 On the history of the SDKPiL, see Strobel 1974, Kochański 1971, Radlak 1979, Najdus 1980, and Sobczak 1980.

23 Lewis 2000, p. 52.

The fact that PPS leader Joseph Pilsudski became the nationalist ‘founding father’ of the independent Polish state has cast a long shadow backwards. But by 1918 Pilsudski had long since been expelled from the PPS; moreover, his cross-class militaristic nationalism marked an indisputable break from the party’s early theory and practice. The PPS’s 1892 founding programme explicitly rejected ‘national unity’ as a fiction masking class-antagonisms: ‘Our upper classes use the banner of national unity to fight the increasing consciousness of the toiling masses. This banner is everywhere contradicted by the existing social relations.’²⁴ Far from advocating class collaboration, the party argued that only the working class could defend the nation and win independence, as the Polish ruling class had capitulated to the occupying powers.²⁵

All wings of the PPS promoted class struggle and national liberation – in both theory and practice – though significant internal divisions over how to synthesise and balance these goals existed from the party’s founding in 1892. By 1903, the party’s revolutionary Marxist wing (the ‘Young’) had taken over leadership of the organisation in Poland, though Pilsudski’s current maintained control of the émigré apparatus.

Similarly, all wings of the PPS advocated collaboration with Russian revolutionaries in the fight against Tsarism, though the ‘Young’ were far more emphatic and pro-active about this than Pilsudski, who tended to be sceptical of Russian socialism. During the 1905 revolution the PPS was firmly under the leadership of the ‘Young’ and actively fought for an empire-wide revolution and broad autonomy for Poland in a democratic Russia, relegating the demand for independence to a long-term goal.²⁶ The PPS was the largest political party in Poland and during the revolution it swelled to 55,000 members, at least fifteen thousand more than the SDKPiL. No less importantly, the PPS was the leading force in Poland’s newly-emerged mass trade unions, the strongest such labour organisations in the entire empire.²⁷

Often the PPS was more active in collaborating with the Russian movement than Luxemburg’s SDKPiL: it was the PPS that sent a Polish socialist representative to the St Petersburg soviet in late 1905 to coordinate the empire-wide struggle and it was the PPS which initiated the general strike and semi-insurrection in conjunction with the December 1905 Moscow workers’ uprising.²⁸ In 1906 the PPS announced its support for the revolutionary

24 ‘Szkiec Programu Polskiej Partii Socjalistycznej’ [1892], in Tych 1975, p. 250.

25 ‘Szkiec Programu Polskiej Partii Socjalistycznej’ [1892], in Tych 1975, p. 251.

26 On the PPS between 1904 and 1906, see Żarnowska 1965.

27 On the PPS, the SDKPiL and trade unions, see below.

28 Żarnowska 1965, pp. 301–12; Sobczak 1980, p. 386.

politics of the Bolsheviks, declaring that the Mensheviks were moderates whose tactics led to the subordination of workers to bourgeois liberals.²⁹

After the downturn in the revolutionary wave, the ongoing conflict within the PPS came to a head. In November 1906, the party majority expelled Pilsudski's minority wing for prioritising guerrilla warfare and Polish national struggle over proletarian mass action and empire-wide revolutionary unity.³⁰ Desiring to overcome the disunity of Polish Marxism and aiming to affiliate with the RSDRP, the PPS changed its name to PPS-Left in 1907, dropped the demand for independence from its political programme, and called for a merger with the SDKPiL. Independence, PPS-Left leaders now argued, while a desirable long-term goal, was not an immediately realisable objective – therefore Polish workers should focus on unity with other nationalities for their common revolutionary tasks.³¹

The radical and internationalist politics of the PPS and PPS-Left makes Luxemburg's continued hostility more difficult to explain. Such an approach was arguably rooted as much in pure factionalism as intransigent internationalism. Consider, for example, Luxemburg's role in the failed 1903 SDKPiL merger with the RSDRP, during which she prioritised fighting the PPS over unifying with Russian socialists. Soon after the arrival of the Polish delegates to the RSDRP congress in Belgium, Luxemburg decided to change the terms of the proposed merger (even though it had been democratically voted on by the SDKPiL congress only a few days earlier). Luxemburg wired the SDKPiL representatives to instruct them to break off negotiations if the RSDRP refused to drop its point on self-determination:³² 'Tell the Russians that after the "Iskra" article the moral value of our joining the Russians (as an anti-PPS measure) is minimal, and it is only the moral issue that we are concerned with ... for us the importance of a merger is mostly not practical but moral, as a

29 'Walka kierunków w łonie Rosyjskiej Socjalnej Demokracji', *Robotnik* № 132, 4 July 1906.

30 Pilsudski's new party became known as the PPS-Revolutionary Faction. Within a few years it was only a marginal force in the workers' movement and by 1914 Pilsudski's turn to militaristic nationalism had led him to leave this party too (Ładyka 1972).

31 In part because the Bolsheviks allied themselves with the SDKPiL, the PPS-Left's enthusiasm for the former cooled between 1907 and 1917. During this period the PPS-Left situated itself in the 'non-factional' revolutionary Marxist camp that included most other borderland parties, as well as Leon Trotsky. The PPS-Left rejected the Mensheviks' call for an alliance with liberals, but thought that the Bolsheviks had not broken from a semi-sectarian stance towards other revolutionary socialists and the workers' movement generally (Kasprzakowa 1965, *passim*).

32 'Depesza R. Luksemburg i Tyszki do Delegatów SDKPiL na II Zjazd SDPRR–A. Warskiego i J. Haneckiego' [1903], in Szmidt (ed.) 1934, p. 390.

permanent demonstration against nationalism.³³ After the RSDRP delegates rejected the SDKPiL proposal, the two Polish representatives left the proceedings, unceremoniously ending the merger efforts.

Even if one believes that the presence of Pilsudski's wing in the early PPS and its advocacy of independence justified Luxemburg's initial polemics, how are we to explain her stance against the PPS-Left after 1906? According to Luxemburg, dropping the demand for independence was insufficient, as real Marxists understood the absolute historical impossibility of ever achieving an independent Poland.³⁴ Thus Luxemburg denounced the PPS-Left as 'a group of bankrupt social-patriots, who had to break with their own past, but who cannot find the way to a social-democratic position.'³⁵ To become real Marxists, the article concluded, members of the PPS-Left would have to break with their 'opportunist' leadership and join the SDKPiL.³⁶ As will be discussed below, Luxemburg's position on the PPS was increasingly rejected by the ranks and local leaders of her party after 1906, contributing to the break of the SDKPiL majority away from Luxemburg's émigré leadership in 1911.

The German SPD and Reformism

Luxemburg is usually portrayed as the earliest and most important Marxist critic of the German Social-Democratic Party. According to a recent article in the *International Socialism* journal, it was Luxemburg who 'first identified the trend within the labour movement towards reformism' and who pioneered the Marxist critique of it.³⁷ Raya Dunayevskaya, likewise, has argued that 'Luxemburg sensed opportunism four years ahead of anyone else.'³⁸ To refute this myth, I will outline the important and relatively unknown history of Luxemburg and the SPD's 1898–1903 conflict with the PPS in Prussian (German) Poland. This struggle led PPS Marxists to systematically critique not only the reformism of the SPD 'revisionists', but also what they saw as the

33 'List R. Luksemburg do Warskiego' [1903], in Szmidt (ed.) 1934, pp. 390, 396.

34 Luxemburg 1908a.

35 Rosa Luxemburg [Anonymous] 1910, 'O druzgocącej krytyce zdruzgotanej partii', *Czerwony sztandar* № 176, 20 June 1910.

36 Ibid.

37 Gluckstein 2014, pp. 144–6.

38 The reference here is to Luxemburg's 1910 break with Kautsky (Dunayevskaya 1982, p. 21). Along similar lines, Gilbert Badia writes that Luxemburg 'was without a doubt the first militant to understand that the German Social Democracy was headed down a dangerous path for the German workers' movement.' (Badia 1975, p. 805.)

political limitations of radical theoretician Karl Kautsky – resulting in the Second International's first major debate on the means to conquer power. In this conflict Luxemburg allied herself with the German party bureaucracy and leaned on its increasing legalism and nationalism.

Founded in 1893, the Polish Socialist Party of the Prussian Partition (PPSzp) organised workers in Upper Silesia and Poznań, the predominantly Polish regions of Prussia (Germany) that would in 1919–21 witness some of the most dramatic events of the Polish revolution, including multiple general strikes and armed insurrections to demand separation from German rule.³⁹

PPSzp policies were significantly less separatist than its sister party in Russia, as the party in Prussia did not even include a demand for Polish independence in its programme (though it did sometimes call for this in its press). Like the 'Russian' PPS, it sought to tie national liberation to the class struggle. 'What the hell would be the use of a free Poland if it were to maintain the same slavery that we currently face', proclaimed the PPSzp's newspaper, *Gazeta Robotnicza* [*Workers' Gazette*].⁴⁰ Its relationship with the German party was initially collaborative and friendly. Acting as an autonomous section of the SPD, the PPSzp adopted the party's 1891 Erfurt Programme as its own and received a significant financial subsidy from the German leadership. For their part, the most well-known leaders of the SPD – August Bebel, Wilhelm Liebknecht, and Karl Kautsky – were all open advocates of Polish independence.

Yet tensions between the two organisations eventually emerged. At the SPD's 1897 congress, the German leadership rejected the PPSzp's proposal that all socialist electoral candidates in districts where Poles were a majority should be able to speak Polish.⁴¹ Many of the top functionaries of the SPD were increasingly adapting to German nationalism and saw the Polish national movement as a threat to their centralised party apparatus and the German state's territorial integrity.⁴² And while the SPD officially opposed Prussia's ongoing Germanisation campaign – which banned Polish in schools and promoted the German colonisation of Polish areas – the main SPD leader in Upper Silesia, August Winter, openly argued that Poles were a less-than-civilised people. In reference to the spread of the socialist movement in Silesia,

39 The three Polish proletarian uprisings in Upper Silesia (August 1919, August 1920, and May 1921) – which had the potential to be a bridge between the Polish and German workers' revolutions – were not supported by the Polish Communist party, which declared that fighting to change state borders was nationalism (Hawranek 1966).

40 Cited in Zieliński 1982, p. 97.

41 Zieliński 1982, pp. 134–9.

42 Wehler 1971, pp. 142, 157.

Winter publicly declared that ‘the Germanisation process exerts beneficial influences ... German comrades everywhere are more intelligent than Polish comrades.’⁴³

With the goal of winning the leaders of the German party to support her wing of Polish socialism against the PPS, Luxemburg moved from Switzerland to Germany in May 1898. ‘Internal party matters, and organisational problems in Poland itself, had traditionally taken second place to the creation of the party’s international image’, writes J.P. Nettl, Luxemburg’s most important biographer.⁴⁴ Within a week of her arrival she met with Ignaz Auer, the organisational head of the SPD. Like most SPD bureaucrats, Auer was on the right wing of the party, prone to German chauvinism, and an opponent of Polish independence.⁴⁵ Enthusiastically accepting Luxemburg’s offer to promote the party’s electoral work among Poles, Auer explained that the whole party executive regarded independence as ‘nonsense’. Praising Germanisation, he told Luxemburg that August Winter ‘had perhaps spoken incautiously ... *one cannot do the Polish workers a greater favour than to Germanize them, but one may not say this publicly*’.⁴⁶

Luxemburg soon set off to Upper Silesia for the electoral campaign. She explained to her comrade and fellow SDKPiL leader Leo Jogiches that she had to do this to win the support of the SPD leadership: ‘This work is the one and only thing that will stand me in good stead with Winter, Bruhns, and the [SPD] Executive, and it is the one and only thing that can give me a good name with everyone.’⁴⁷ Upon her arrival, she was disappointed to find that Winter was insufficiently oriented towards attacking the PPSzp and that he was even considering dropping the fight altogether: ‘I’ve made a big effort to knock that idea out of his head, and to a large extent I’ve succeeded, but in spite of all that, on his own initiative he will not attack them [the PPSzp], and they will also not attack him. Because one must definitely make use of a good opportunity to thrash their hides a little bit once again.’⁴⁸

Luxemburg herself was a consistent defender of Polish culture and a vocal opponent of the Prussian government’s Germanisation drive. Along these lines, Luxemburg got the SPD to pass resolutions condemning the Prussian

43 Cited in Hawranek 1977, p. 156.

44 Nettl 1966, pp. 258–9.

45 Auer is perhaps most remembered today for having coined the bureaucratic maxim: ‘General strike is general nonsense.’

46 ‘May 25, 1898’, in Luxemburg 2011, p. 52. Emphasis in original.

47 ‘June 9, 1898’, in Luxemburg 2011, p. 60.

48 ‘June 24, 1898’, in Luxemburg 2011, pp. 67–8.

government's anti-Polish policies.⁴⁹ Yet Luxemburg was more focused on combatting the national orientation of the PPSzp than the chauvinism of Auer, Winter and other SPD leaders – in fact she disingenuously denied that there were Germanising tendencies within the SPD.⁵⁰ This was, to say the least, a major political miscalculation. Events would show that it was an adaptation to German nationalism, not Polish separatism, which proved fatal for the SPD as a revolutionary organisation.

In 1900, Luxemburg and a few of her supporters attended the PPSzp congress and proposed resolutions that the party renounce its 'nationalism' and dissolve itself as a distinct organisation. After these proposals failed, Luxemburg succeeded in getting the SPD to cut its subsidy for the PPSzp in April 1901.⁵¹ Under pressure from Luxemburg, SPD leader August Bebel reversed his support for Polish independence and announced to the PPSzp that the SPD could be 'tried for high treason' if it had links to supporters of Polish independence.⁵² In the coming years, the SPD leadership's continued aversion to raising demands that could potentially prompt persecution would play a central role in the party's adaptation to the regime.

One of the ironies of Luxemburg's campaign against the PPSzp was that it placed her in conflict with Polish and German militants who were much closer to her revolutionary Marxist orientation than the SPD leadership to which she was allied. Of these, perhaps the most interesting was Estera Golde, the PPSzp's main leader at the time. A major forgotten figure of Polish Marxism, Golde – like Luxemburg, a Polonised Jew – was on the radical left of the PPS. 'To defend our country today, we can rely only on the international class struggle',⁵³ Golde argued. For most of 1903 she was imprisoned by the Prussian government for 'inciting class hatred'. Unlike Luxemburg, Golde prioritised the fight for women's emancipation, taking advantage of her professional training as a doctor to organise lectures and reading groups for working women on female health, Marxism and the workers' movement.⁵⁴ In 1906 she co-edited the PPS

49 Rauba 2005, p. 40.

50 Hawranek 1977, p. 167.

51 Wehler 1971, pp. 151–2.

52 Cited in Hawranek 1977, p. 203.

53 Golde 1896, p. 15.

54 Polish sources generally undermine the exaggerated claim that Luxemburg was 'determined to build a women's liberation movement' (Dunayevskaya 1982, p. 13). Luxemburg certainly stood for women's equality, yet her few articles on women were all in German. While Luxemburg included a point on women's equality in her important 1906 Polish piece *Czego chcemy?*, Polish women's historian Dioniza Wawrzykowska-Wierciochowa notes that 'the SDKPiL was scarcely interested in activating the masses of female workers

newspaper *Robotnica* [*Woman Worker*] and in the 1920s became a leader of the Polish Communist Party's Women's Department.⁵⁵

Luxemburg's orientation similarly brought her into conflict with leading German SPD leftists, as the main force inside the SPD challenging the party's new Polish line was a group led by Georg Ledebour, a prominent left leader and an opponent of the pro-colonial tendencies within the SPD.

Despite the desire of Golde, Ledebour and other militants in the SPD and PPSzp to come to an agreement, the years 1902 and 1903 were marked by an escalating conflict over the upcoming Reichstag elections. In October 1902, the two organisations reached an accord basically on the terms set out by Luxemburg and the SPD Executive Committee: there would be only one slate of candidates chosen by the local (Polish and German) organisations. In a concession to the PPSzp it was also agreed that all candidates should be bilingual in Polish regions, though – as insisted on by the SPD leadership and Luxemburg – an exception would be made if Winter were nominated by a local organisation.⁵⁶

But Luxemburg proved to be more intent on fighting the 'social-patriots' than in reaching an accord. Following the PPSzp's acceptance of the agreement, Luxemburg unilaterally insisted on new conditions, including dropping any references to Polish independence, admitting her into the PPSzp leadership, and changing the group's name to the 'Polish Social-Democratic Organisation'.⁵⁷ The additional set of conditions, combined with the scandal created by the accidental leak of a secret SPD leadership memo against Polish independence, effectively blew up the deal.⁵⁸ 'This time Rosa's determination to humiliate her opponents had gone too far', notes Nettl.⁵⁹

At this point, Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz – Esther Golde's close comrade and the PPS's leading Marxist theoretician – wrote to Kautsky, imploring him to intervene in support of the PPSzp at the upcoming 1903 SPD Dresden congress.

and female intelligentsia.... Even in the tumultuous years of 1905–1907, when women in the Kingdom [of Poland] demonstrated their revolutionary militancy, Rosa was not interested and underestimated their role.... [Luxemburg] did not see the need for special agitation among them or for distinct cells to organise them.' According to the author, Luxemburg's stance may explain why the PPS and the PPS-Left had a significantly higher number of women members than the SDKPiL (Wawrzykowska-Wierciochowa 1987, pp. 244, 303).

55 On Golde, see Wawrzykowska-Wierciochowa 1987, pp. 219–22, 243–9.

56 *Przedświt* Redakcja 1903a; Wehler 1971, pp. 162–3.

57 *Przedświt* Redakcja 1903b, pp. 173–80; Wehler 1971, p. 164; Hawranek, pp. 233–4.

58 Hawranek 1977, p. 235.

59 Nettl 1966, p. 181.

Though Kautsky, with his typical reluctance to intervene in internal organisational conflicts, did not heed Kelles-Krauz's call, Ledebour and other German leftists fought hard in defence of the PPSz. Ledebour focused his criticisms on Luxemburg's role: 'The Executive Committee, which doesn't speak Polish and thus cannot form its own opinion on the agitation of Polish socialists, has come under the influence of Comrade Luxemburg ... the sworn enemy of the Polish organisation.... I am firmly convinced that the failure of the agreement is due only to comrade Luxemburg.' Similarly, the radical militant Konrad Haenisch declared that the PPSz was not a chauvinist organisation and argued that the SPD should continue to promote the Polish national-independence struggle. But as their efforts received no support from the party's top leaders, the 1903 Dresden congress approved Luxemburg's resolution on the Polish question.⁶⁰

In short, Luxemburg's drive against the PPSz, despite her consistent opposition to Germanisation and her commitment to revolutionary Marxism, inadvertently promoted the SPD executive's growing nationalism and legalism. Luxemburg later became the most vocal and consistent opponent of the SPD Executive and its support for German colonialism – but she was prevented from filling this role in these early years due to her campaign against the PPS.

By 1903 Luxemburg had fulfilled the initial goal of her move to Germany. Getting SPD leaders to drop their support for Polish independence dealt a major blow to the legitimacy of the PPS and its political project. And by gaining the confidence of the SPD hierarchy, Luxemburg successfully established herself as the SPD's arbiter on Polish and Russian affairs.⁶¹ In the coming years Luxemburg and other SDKPiL émigrés would systematically utilise their connections to German and Russian socialist leaderships to isolate and discredit their factional opponents inside of Poland. It would be hard to overestimate the importance of this dynamic for the Polish revolutionary struggle: the PPS-Left's repeated attempts to join the RSDRP were successfully blocked by Luxemburg and the SDKPiL, which in 1906, with the support of the Bolsheviks, had demanded and won this veto power as a precondition for joining the Russian Social Democracy.⁶²

The 1903 SPD Dresden congress resolution was a major victory for Luxemburg and a disaster for the PPS. Kelles-Krauz denounced the SPD's new approach to

60 *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitagés der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands. Abgehalten vom 13. bis zu Dresden 20. September 1903*, Berlin: Expedition der Buchhandlung Vorwärts, Th. Glocke, pp. 275–81.

61 Thus Luxemburg participated in the 1907 RSDRP congress as the official representative of the SPD leadership.

62 Kasprzakowa 1965, *passim*.

the Poles as ‘the worst kind of revisionism’.⁶³ Shortly thereafter, he and other PPS Marxists published a series of groundbreaking critiques of German socialist strategy, hoping to show that the SPD’s revised Polish policies reflected a deeper turn away from a revolutionary orientation.

To understand the novelty of these contributions, the political content of the revisionist debate up until this point must be kept in mind. Against reformist-socialist Eduard Bernstein’s proposed changes to Marxist theory, ‘orthodox’ (i.e., revolutionary) Marxists such as Luxemburg and Kautsky defended the SPD’s longstanding orientation, which combined ‘slow-but-steady’ parliamentarism, trade-unionism and party-building, with a programmatic espousal of revolutionary objectives. Bernstein argued that the party’s revolutionary rhetoric and stress on the socialist ‘final goal’ should be abandoned, as SPD practice was in reality reformist. Kautsky and Luxemburg – notably in her 1899 *Reform or Revolution?* – responded that the SPD’s strategic and practical orientation was revolutionary and must remain so. The relatively abstract nature of the debate allowed even the most conservative leaders of the SPD to publicly reject Bernstein’s ‘revisionism’ – which was overwhelmingly and repeatedly condemned by SPD congresses.⁶⁴ Auer wrote to Bernstein to explain why there was no need to drop the party’s formal adherence to revolutionary politics:

The party would be blown to pieces if the leaders would act accordingly to your demands.... Your demands cannot be formally agreed upon and cannot be talked about, they are just acted upon. Our whole activity, even under the infamous [1878–90 anti-socialist] law, was the activity of a Social Democratic reform party.⁶⁵

PPS Marxists, in contrast with Luxemburg and Kautsky, declared that the SPD must change its perspectives and practices if it wanted to effectively reach its revolutionary goals. Three major texts marked the 1904 debate: an initial polemic against Kautsky by Kelles-Krauz, which argued for the necessity of proletarian armed insurrections to overthrow capitalism in Western Europe; a reply by Kautsky, defending and elaborating on his strategy; and a subsequent long response by PPS left leader Marian Bielecki titled *Zagadnienia rewolucji* [*Issues of Revolution*].⁶⁶ As the first two texts have recently been translated into

63 Cited in Snyder 1997, p. 182.

64 On Luxemburg’s role in the revisionist debate, see Nettl 1966, pp. 202–50.

65 Cited in Roth 1963, p. 191.

66 Bielecki’s contribution also marked an important step in the PPS’s internal debate, as he argued (against the position of both Kelles-Krauz and Pilsudski) that a revolution in

English, here I will highlight Bielecki's contribution, which remains virtually unknown today even though it was the world's first major Marxist critique of the SPD and Kautsky.⁶⁷ Given the extensive scope of the piece, a brief summary of its most pioneering arguments will have to suffice.

Zagadnienia rewolucyj contended that the SPD as a whole – not just its 'revisionist' minority – had become mired in a legalistic reformism that postponed the fight for socialism to the indefinite future.⁶⁸ The SPD's 'change in tactics in a moderate spirit', wrote Bielecki, was rooted in an adaptation to the preceding decades of peaceful social development, during which the party, and its affiliated union and cultural institutions, had expanded massively.⁶⁹ Many in the SPD now felt that revolutionary clashes would only serve to give the ruling class a pretext to destroy these conquests.⁷⁰ But hope in a continued pacific evolution of political life, *Zagadnienia rewolucyj* declared, was illusory.⁷¹ Opportunism in the SPD, according to Bielecki, was rooted in a newly-emerged social 'substratum': the 'vast majority of party functionaries' who 'lead a completely quiet life' and who were thus ill-disposed to 'conflicts with the existing order'.⁷² As such, this growing conservatism was a problem distinct from 'revisionism' (a theoretical current).⁷³

Like Kelles-Krauz, Bielecki identified with the general theory of 'orthodox' Marxism, but he rejected specific political stances taken by Kautsky, notably his hesitancy to break with bourgeois-democratic legality, his argument that political mass strikes were only justified in a narrow set of circumstances, his rejection of revolutionary agitation inside the army, and his opposition to orienting towards proletarian armed insurrection.⁷⁴ Advocating for the relevance

central Russia was imminent and that the main ally of Polish workers was therefore the Russian proletariat.

67 For large excerpts of Kelles-Krauz's piece and the entirety of Kautsky's reply, see Day and Gaido (eds.) 2009, pp. 188–92, 197–249. One of the reasons for the obscurity of Bielecki's piece is that it was published in Polish, unlike the previous two pieces, which were published in Kautsky's German-language journal *Die Neue Zeit*. During this 1904 debate, Luxemburg sided with Kautsky against Kelles-Krauz and the PPS (Snyder 1997, pp. 184–5).

68 Bielecki 1904, pp. 265–6.

69 Bielecki 1904, p. 266.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid. Bielecki also noted a second opportunism-inclined substratum inside the SPD: new members of the party who had joined without seriously assimilating Marxist politics (ibid.).

73 Ibid.

74 Bielecki 1904, pp. 266–72, 314–22.

of these tactics, Bielecki somewhat unfairly asserted that ‘the leader of the radical wing of Social Democracy in practical politics puts forward a path of future development for the German proletariat that is not very different from that of the “opportunists”, against whom he showered such thunderbolts at the Dresden congress.’⁷⁵ Both Kautsky and the SPD moderates, *Zagadnienia rewolucyj*i concluded, tell the proletariat ‘that there is nothing left to do but to continue to organise, educate, and wait – wait until we win a decisive majority of society’.⁷⁶

Many of Bielecki’s political criticisms of the SPD were borne out by subsequent events, as the Social-Democratic leadership held back the 1905 German workers’ upsurge and firmly stood on the bourgeois side of the barricades during the 1918–23 German revolution. No less important was Bielecki’s observation that German Social Democracy’s descent into reformism was largely due to the emergence of a strata of conservative party functionaries during the SPD’s first decades of peaceful development. It is important to keep this insight in mind, as the party’s reformism is not infrequently blamed on Kautsky’s theories. Yet most SPD leaders, far from being followers of Kautsky, were bureaucratic ‘practicals’ uninterested in socialist theory.⁷⁷

To see what a party led by ‘orthodox’ Social Democrats looked like in practice, one must examine the Tsarist empire, not Germany. In Russia, the existence of a feudal-absolutist state and the absence of political freedom mitigated against the growth of strong reformist tendencies or the emergence of bureaucratised labour apparatuses. However one judges Kautsky’s political strengths and limitations, the fact remains that his writings served as the main foundation for the Tsarist empire’s most radical parties, including the SDKPiL, the PPS-Left, and the Bolsheviks.

Though Kautsky’s works proved sufficiently revolutionary to train the Marxists who led the world’s first successful socialist revolution, Kautsky himself capitulated to the German labour officialdom after 1909, leading Luxemburg in 1910 and Lenin in 1914 to arrive at criticisms of the SPD and Kautsky similar to those first articulated by Bielecki in 1904.

75 Bielecki 1904, p. 266.

76 Bielecki 1904, pp. 319–20.

77 Kautsky thus argued in 1909 that the German party and union leaders ‘have been so absorbed by the administrative needs of the huge apparatus that they have lost every broad view, every interest for anything outside the affairs of their own offices’ (cited in Day and Gaido (eds.) 2009, p. 52).

The Party and Spontaneity

One of the most important political strengths of Luxemburg and her party was undoubtedly their emphasis on working-class action. It was largely due to the SDKPiL's tireless agitation among working people that it gained a popular base during 1905–6. Moreover, Luxemburg's famous 1906 pamphlet on the mass strike posed a clear alternative to European Social Democracy's prevailing prioritisation of organisation and education over action. Arguing that the 1905 revolution pointed the way forward for the workers' movement across Europe and the world, Luxemburg articulated three inter-related theses:

1. The working-class majority would storm the political arena before being fully organised and educated by the Social Democracy (i.e., 'spontaneously');
2. Most workers would come to revolutionary conclusions not through party publications or speeches, but through their experience in these tumultuous political upheavals;
3. Thus the main way for Marxist parties to effectively fight for workers' power was to promote mass actions and – in the process of the struggle itself – to give them leadership and organisation.

Countless authors have problematically counterposed this strategy to the purported elitism of Lenin and his top-down vanguard party. Bruno Naarden thus argues that Luxemburg advocated a 'theory of spontaneity', whose 'hallmark' was a 'glorification of the spontaneity of the masses'. This stance, the author claims, 'proved how far removed she was' from the Bolsheviks and how 'her viewpoint was approaching that of anarchists and syndicalists'.⁷⁸

This false dichotomy has been challenged by various academics and activists, who note Lenin's shared enthusiasm for 'spontaneous' mass action and Luxemburg's conviction that a revolutionary Marxist party was an indispensable vehicle to lead the insurgent masses to conquer power.⁷⁹ Indeed, the mass-action orientation implemented by the Bolsheviks in 1917 basically stood in continuity with the perspectives articulated by Luxemburg in 1906.

78 Naarden 1992, p. 144. Jack Conrad likewise writes that Luxemburg 'adhered to a theory of spontaneity.... Because she tended to downplay organisation and over-emphasise spontaneity, Luxemburg was reluctant to establish a serious, disciplined, leftwing faction in the SDP before 1914. Unlike Lenin and the Bolsheviks, of course' (Conrad 2006, p. 22.)

79 See, for instance, Harman 1968–9, p. 26.

Yet even authors who note Lenin and Luxemburg's similarities generally maintain that before 1917 there *were* fundamental differences in their conception of the nature and role of the revolutionary party. Unlike Lenin, according to this analysis, Luxemburg remained wedded to the Second International's view that the party should embrace the whole class (not just its vanguard) and that revolutionaries should not organise separately from reformist socialists. According to Chris Harman's influential account, Luxemburg advocated a 'party of the whole class' model: 'All the tendencies within the class had to be represented within it. Any split within it was to be conceived of as a split within the class. Centralisation, although recognised as necessary, was feared as a centralisation over and against the spontaneous activity of the class.'⁸⁰ In contrast with Lenin and his independent Bolshevik party, it is argued, Luxemburg refused to organisationally break from the reformists, hoping in vain that the impending revolutionary upsurge would overcome opportunism in the party and its leadership.⁸¹

While it is justified to criticise Luxemburg (and other SPD radicals) for failing to organise the SPD's left wing as a distinct current before 1914, it does not follow that this error reflected a strategic divergence with Lenin on party-building. The basic flaw in such an interpretation is that it cannot account for the 'Leninist' nature of Luxemburg's organisation in Poland. Indeed, the SDKPiL shared all of the attributes that are generally said to be the distinct features of Bolshevism: organisational separateness from reformists, political cohesiveness, and/or tight centralisation.

The fact that both Luxemburg's and Lenin's parties in Tsarist Russia looked very different from the German SPD was not caused by a break with 'orthodox' Marxism. Nobody in Tsarist Russia called for a 'party of a new type', for the simple reason that Social-Democratic 'orthodoxy' already proclaimed that the party should organise the most advanced layers of the class on the basis of a Marxist programme.⁸²

The obvious differences between socialist parties in Tsarist Russia and their counterparts across Europe were basically the result of the context of Russian absolutism.⁸³ Marxists generally agreed that conditions under Tsarism pre-

80 Harman 1968–9, p. 30.

81 This case is made in Gluckstein 2014 and Rose 2015.

82 Lih 2006.

83 The one exception proves the rule: In Finland, the only region of the Tsarist empire with wide political freedom and a legalised socialist party, the Finnish Social-Democratic Party, shared the same organisational form and legalistic-parliamentary orientation as the German SPD.

cluded any attempt to adopt the organisational structure – or the particular political focus – of the German SPD. And at no point in the prewar years did either Lenin or Luxemburg argue that their form of party organisation in the Tsarist empire should be replicated by revolutionaries in Germany or the rest of Europe.

Moreover, the absence of political freedom facilitated a completely different relationship of forces between reformists and revolutionaries inside the Russian empire's socialist movement. As such, the challenging question – posed in Germany and across Western Europe – of how a revolutionary Marxist minority could effectively overcome the bureaucratised leadership of a mass socialist party was simply not posed under Tsarism. Of course, even within Luxemburg and Lenin's shared 'orthodox' framework, all sorts of concrete differences over how best to politically proceed in the specific conditions of Tsarist Russia were inevitable. But examining the theory and practice of Luxemburg's party in Poland demonstrates that her well-known debates with Lenin did not reflect any consistent divergences.

On the basis of her influential 1904 polemic against Lenin, Luxemburg is frequently upheld as a consistent promoter of party democracy against the supposedly 'authoritarian' Bolsheviks. Yet, in practice, the SDKPiL was certainly one of the least-democratic socialist parties in the whole Tsarist empire. Nettl notes that Luxemburg's 'own attitudes in the Polish party hardly bore out such demands for more "democracy"; instead of controlling local organizations, she simply ignored them altogether. Jogiches, on the other hand, later tried to institute a system of control as tight as Lenin's, even if he did not choose to expound a philosophy of centralization.'⁸⁴

Particularly after 1905, repeated internal SDKPiL oppositions arose to challenge the party's political line and internal functioning, only to be slandered, isolated, and/or expelled through organisational manoeuvres by the leadership. One particularly egregious method used by Luxemburg and her leadership was their repeated public disclosure of the real names of factional opponents who operated under pseudonyms, opening them up to state repression.⁸⁵ 'The systematic recourse to defamation and intrigues had become a method to maintain power inside the SDKPiL', notes Swiss historian Jean-François Fayet.⁸⁶

The mass upsurge and relatively more-free conditions opened by the 1905 revolution led most socialist parties in the Tsarist empire – including the

84 Nettl 1966, p. 288.

85 For instance, this method was used against Kelles-Krauz in 1904 (Snyder 1997, pp. 184–5) and against Radek in 1912 (Nettl 1966, pp. 586–7).

86 Fayet 2004, p. 113.

Bolsheviks – to take significant steps towards internal democracy.⁸⁷ But the SDKPiL moved in the exact opposite direction. In 1906, the party rejected all motions by rank-and-file leaders to make concessions to democratic functioning, and instead deepened its centralising tendencies by adopting a new party structure that granted unprecedented powers to its five-man émigré leadership.⁸⁸ The SDKPiL was run in an increasingly dictatorial manner by Leo Jogiches and Feliks Dzierżyński – a dynamic that would have been unfeasible without Luxemburg’s consistent backing and ideological support.⁸⁹

And while one can certainly find passages in Luxemburg’s German writings that downplay the distinction between the party and the class, or that argue against organisational splits from reformists, such ambiguities were not reflected in SDKPiL practice, nor were they the norm in her Polish writings. Consider, for example, Luxemburg’s justification for SDKPiL intransigence towards the PPS, which could easily be mistaken for something written by Lenin:

The fact is that the existence of a strictly-class proletarian party – that bases its principles on a theoretical understanding of its activities, that knows no compromise on tactics, that is inflexible in the application and defence of the whole of its views, that is inaccessible to any half-bred and half-hearted shades of socialism – has an effect and impact far beyond its own organisation. It constantly weighs on the other factions and shades of socialism, and on the whole workers’ movement. How many charges were thrown against the ‘intransigent’ Guesde-ists in France for their decades-long rejection of unification with all other socialist groups! History proved them right – it was shown that the strength of a socialist party consists not in superficially cobbling together a plethora of members, nor in opulent cashboxes or an abundance of rubbish party leaflets, but rather in the stability and clarity of its views, in the concordance and spiritual unity of its ranks, in the concurrence between its words and deeds.⁹⁰

87 Similarly, the Bolsheviks moved away from their earlier stress on tight party centralisation – from at least 1905 until the Russian Civil War, the Bolshevik current’s organisational practices were significantly looser than the strict centralisation envisioned by *Iskra* during 1900–3.

88 Blobaum 1984, pp. 34–5.

89 Fayet 2004, Blobaum 1984, and Nettl 1966, *passim*.

90 Luxemburg 1908a, p. 62.

So while Luxemburg advocated the organisational unity of Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, she at the same time rejected any organisational merger between the SDKPiL and the PPS-Left, despite the fact that the latter was consistently to the left of the Mensheviks. In fact, while Luxemburg's party maintained a separate organisational structure for the whole pre-1917 period, the Bolsheviks were much less consistent. It was the Mensheviks, not the Bolsheviks, who had initiated the RSDRP split in 1903 by refusing to abide by the majority decisions of the Second Congress. In 1906 the two currents reunited. Even after the Bolsheviks began to *de facto* split away in 1912, they sought to include whole wings of Mensheviks inside their RSDRP, including even for a time those such as Giorgi Plekhanov who were openly committed to a strategic alliance between workers and the liberal bourgeoisie.

Assessing which political differences were permissible, and which tendencies could effectively co-exist, inside a Marxist party or fraction was a challenging question that no *a priori* formula could provide the concrete answers to. These complexities all too often get forgotten today, leading to an oversimplified understanding of the development of Bolshevism.

While many authors have claimed that the defining element of Bolshevik success in 1917 was its 'Leninist' organisational structure, the failure of Luxemburg's party to lead the 1918–19 Polish revolution to victory would seem to demonstrate that the existence of a separate party of revolutionary Marxists was an insufficient condition for a working-class conquest of power. Luxemburg's party lacked neither a separate structure, nor a homogenous commitment to revolutionary Marxism – but it proved unable to play a mass-leadership role analogous to the Bolsheviks, despite the favourable conditions for socialist revolution in postwar Poland.

If the main political liability of the SDKPiL after 1914 was its continued opposition to Polish independence, in the preceding years its major strategic weakness was a general opposition to united-front mass organisations and united fronts in action with the PPS. Luxemburg and the SDKPiL sought to implement the model of 'orthodox' German Marxists, according to which working-class unity must be achieved directly through the party. In this conception, there should only be one workers' party, to which all mass workers' organisations (unions, etc.) should be politically and organisationally tied.

This orientation – which I will call 'monopolism' – was perhaps plausible in Germany, but it was problematic in places like Poland and central Russia where multiple relatively-small socialist organisations existed. Here the dynamics of mass struggle necessitated unity in action between different political tendencies and required the formation of non-party mass organisations (factory

committees, unions, workers' councils) to coordinate actions and organise the wide strata of workers who did not belong to any parties.

In short, there was a major tension between Marxist 'orthodoxy' and the main forms of workers' organisation that spread across the Tsarist empire during and following the 1905 revolution. 'Monopolism' was also initially strong among the Bolsheviks, resulting in their infamous calls for the 1905 St Petersburg soviet to follow the RSDRP's leadership and adopt its programme. But they eventually proved able during late 1905, and particularly afterwards, to flexibly adjust their practices to the actual dynamics of mass struggle. Though the term 'united front' was not coined until after the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks and many other Marxists had been practising this method for well over a decade.⁹¹

The contrast with Luxemburg's party is striking. Poland, like the rest of the empire, witnessed a spontaneous push for unity by the insurgent working class in 1905. In addition to the formation of ad-hoc united committees in innumerable workplaces, Poland's four socialist parties (the SDKPiL, PPS, Bund, and PPS-Proletariat) often began to jointly coordinate strikes, demonstrations and self-defence on a city-wide level. Yet time and time again the top SDKPiL leadership intervened to put an end to these united fronts, declaring that programmatic differences precluded coordination with the PPS.⁹² To cite one of many examples: after the SDKPiL in Łódź reached an agreement in late 1905 to jointly organise an anti-government strike with the PPS (as it did not have the force to organise this on its own), the top party leadership intervened to annul the agreement, eventually leading top Łódź SDKPiL cadre to resign in protest at what they called the 'bureaucratisation' of their party.⁹³

It would be hard to exaggerate just how damaging this lack of unity in action proved to be for the Polish revolution. Warsaw SDKPiL head Stanisław Gutt wrote in 1905 that 'if the proletariat today falls in battle, moving in separate groups rather than as a compact batch, we will be to blame and we will in the future have to answer seriously to history.'⁹⁴

On 27 December 1905, as the empire was engulfed in general strikes and insurrections, the PPS-Proletariat issued a call for Poland to follow the lead of central Russia by establishing workers' councils (soviets), arguing that this was

91 Consider, for example, Trotsky's analysis of the Bolsheviks' united-front tactics during 1917 (Trotsky 1932, pp. 76–83).

92 Żarnowska 1965, pp. 162, 198, 243, 324.

93 Michta 1987, pp. 142–3.

94 Cited in Sobczak (ed.) 1988, p. 64.

the only feasible way to successfully overcome the ‘tremendous damage’ done by the prevailing disunity in the Polish workers’ movement:

On the banners of all socialist parties is inscribed the slogan: ‘Proletarians of all countries unite!’ However, it is easy to write this slogan – but to achieve it is harder.... In [Tsarist] Poland there are as many as four different socialist organisations, and each cry: ‘Follow us, for only we can lead you to the Kingdom of Heaven’ ... [But] there is only one way to defeat the government: it is our solidarity and unity in action.... [To achieve this unity requires] a Council of Workers’ Deputies, which will include representatives from all factories, plants, and professions, and the representatives of all the socialist parties.⁹⁵

But this proposal – presaging Trotsky’s analysis of soviets as ‘the highest form of the united front’ – was denounced by the SDKPiL.⁹⁶ It issued a leaflet declaring that the call for councils in Poland ‘could only create confusion in the revolutionary ranks and harm the workers’ cause’. The purpose of the soviet in central Russia, the leaflet claimed, was not ‘to unite workers of different parties’, but rather to ‘link up the social-democratic party to the unconscious, dark, inert mass’. Councils could not ‘remedy the evil’ of the division of the Polish workers’ movement, because the proletariat ‘must have one programme and one class party’ and because ‘without a programme it is impossible to struggle against the Tsarist government or struggle against the capitalists’. Therefore, unity and victory could be achieved through explaining to the workers that only the SDKPiL represented their ‘real demands and interests’.⁹⁷

The contradiction between ‘monopolism’ and the dynamics of mass struggle was no less evident in regard to labour unions. Poland witnessed an explosive growth of unions in 1905 and 1906 – over 20% of Polish workers

95 *Odezwa Komitet Centralny Pol. Par. Soc. ‘Proletaryat’, Warszawa, 27 Grudnia 1905 r.* (Dokumenty życia społecznego, Biblioteka Narodowa).

96 ‘Just as the trade union is the rudimentary form of the united front in the economic struggle, so the soviet is the highest form of the united front under the conditions in which the proletariat enters the epoch of fighting for power.’ (Trotsky 1932, p. 91.)

97 *Odezwa Komitet Warszawski Socjaldemokracji Królestwa Polskiego i Litwy, Warszawa, 12 Lutego 1906* (Dokumenty życia społecznego, Biblioteka Narodowa). Contrary to this leaflet’s assertion, the soviets in St Petersburg and beyond *did* unite different socialist parties (the various wings of the RSDRP, the Socialist Revolutionaries, non-Russian Marxists, etc.). After the 1917 revolution, both Luxemburg and the SDKPiL came out in support of workers’ councils, but it was not until 1922–3 that the Polish Communist party adopted the theory and practice of the workers’ united front.

became unionised in these years, by far the highest percentage in the whole empire. While the PPS promoted non-party unions open to all workers irrespective of their party affiliation, the SDKPiL instead organised their own separate social-democratic trade unions that were instructed not to cooperate with the other unions. These ‘party unions’ were organisationally tied to the SDKPiL, recognised its political leadership, and gave ten per cent of member-dues to the party. The results were predictably damaging, not only for the unity of the workers’ movement, but also for the influence of the SDKPiL, as their unions consistently represented far fewer workers than the non-partisan unions promoted by the PPS and later the PPS-Left.⁹⁸

The SDKPiL’s continued ‘monopolism’ after 1905, combined with the anti-democratic practices of its leadership, provoked an internal party rebellion culminating in the split of late 1911. As the Warsaw Committee of the SDKPiL was spearheading the struggle for more internal democracy and a new approach to the unions and the PPS-Left, Luxemburg, Jogiches and Dzierżyński announced that Warsaw SDKPiL leaders were agents of the Tsarist secret police (the Okhrana) and declared the committee dissolved.⁹⁹ The Warsaw Committee rejected these slanders and refused to submit. In a December 1913 letter to the International Socialist Bureau demonstrating that Luxemburg’s leadership had lost almost its entire base of support in Poland, the Warsaw and Łódź SDKPiL committees declared that ‘Rosa Luxemburg and her “party leadership” represent at most a Berlin émigré group, but have nothing to do with the workers’ movement in Poland.’¹⁰⁰

Marginalised among Polish militants, Luxemburg’s group sought to use its significant influence in the German party to discredit the oppositionists. One of the main means it employed was to attack Karl Radek – a Polish SDKPiL writer living in Germany who supported the Warsaw oppositionists – who for many years had been accused by right-wing socialists of having stolen from other militants.¹⁰¹ Though Luxemburg and Jogiches had only the year before defended Radek against these charges, they revived these accusations in 1911 and successfully convinced the SPD Executive to expel him from the German party.

98 Kočański and Orzechowski 1964.

99 Post-1917 studies of the Okhrana archives confirmed the slanderous nature of this claim. On the SDKPiL split, see Strobel 1974, pp. 361–481, and Michta 1987, pp. 208–63.

100 *An Das Internationale Sozialistische Bureau, 1 Dezember 1913, Warschauer Komitee, Lodzser Komitee SDKPiL* (Archiwum Akt Nowych, 9/VII – 36).

101 On the ‘Radek Affair’, see Fayet 2004, pp. 61–158.

The Executive seized the opportunity, as Radek was one of their main radical critics and, moreover, was linked to the Bremen organisation of the SPD – the only major urban branch controlled by the party's left wing. Fayet notes that Luxemburg 'allied with the German leadership without understanding the significance that Radek's expulsion would take on in Germany and particularly the utilisation of this by the German Executive in its efforts to muzzle the radicals of which she was part.'¹⁰²

Yet even after the German leadership's offensive transformed the 'Radek affair' into a major nationwide drive against the party's radicals, Luxemburg continued to ally against Radek with the Executive, despite her political opposition to it on so many other questions. Luxemburg's actions effectively blew up the unity of the party's most important leftist forces. 'The old unity of struggle that existed between Luxemburg and the Bremen radicals was now done for good.... The two would lose in this affair a necessary base of support in the clash of tendencies that divided the SPD', notes Fayet.¹⁰³ As had been the case during her 1898–1903 campaign against the PPSz, Luxemburg's factionalism had led her into an alliance with the SPD bureaucracy – and again pitted her against potential radical allies inside of Germany and Poland.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion: The Defeated 1918–19 Polish Revolution

The Polish revolution of 1918–19 was the ultimate test for Poland's Marxists. World War One and the 1917–18 revolutions in Russia, Germany and Austria imploded the occupying states, leaving a power vacuum in Poland and unleashing a radical upheaval of workers and peasants. In the wake of the conquest of Polish independence on 7 November 1918, over a hundred workers' councils, as well as armed Red Guards, sprung up across Poland. The country was engulfed by extreme instability, manifest in ruling-class disarray, soldier mutinies, repeated general strikes and armed insurrections. But despite these favourable revolutionary conditions, Polish Marxists were unable to lead the working class to power.

¹⁰² Fayet 2004, pp. 115–16.

¹⁰³ Fayet 2004, p. 125.

¹⁰⁴ The SDKPiL reunited in 1916, a process made possible in part by the arrest of virtually the entire leadership of the SDKPiL inside of Poland during the war, combined with the imprisonment of Luxemburg, Jogiches and Dzierżyński. On the reunification, see Michta 1987, pp. 263–81, and Najdus 1980, pp. 387–91.

The big question hanging over this period is whether a different outcome would have been possible had the strategy of the PPS-Left, rather than the SDKPiL, guided the early Polish Communist Party. The PPS-Left was well-positioned to have played such a role. During the 1912–14 proletarian upsurge in Poland, while the SDKPiL was embroiled in factional turmoil, the PPS-Left again became the leading political force in the growing strike wave and union movement. PPS-Left mass influence was further amplified when in 1912 it elected the first Polish socialist ever to the Tsarist *Duma*.¹⁰⁵ In 1917 the PPS-Left was the largest and most influential revolutionary Marxist party in Poland, it consistently fought against the imperialist war, and it opposed socialist participation in the bourgeois Provisional Government.¹⁰⁶ Though the PPS-Left remained ‘non-factional’ throughout 1917, it declared its unconditional support for the October Revolution, arguing that it marked the opening shot in the world socialist revolution.¹⁰⁷ And its stance on national liberation – self-determination through workers’ revolution – certainly corresponded better to the political dynamics inside of Poland, and was closer to Lenin’s position, than that of the SDKPiL.

Yet despite their ongoing differences on the national question, the Bolsheviks continued to ally with the SDKPiL during these crucial years, just as they had ever since 1906. During 1917 and 1918, hundreds of SDKPiL militants living in St Petersburg joined the Bolshevik party and the new Soviet state, often receiving top leadership posts. Feliks Dzierżyński entered the Bolshevik Central Committee in August 1917 and the Bolsheviks’ Department for Polish Affairs – a section of the Commissariat on Nationalities led by Joseph Stalin – was headed by Julian Leszczyński, a SDKPiL leader who used this position to propagate against Polish independence and national self-determination.¹⁰⁸ The requests of PPS-Left groups in Russia to affiliate with the Russian Communist Party were rejected, on the grounds that the PPS-Left had failed to fuse into the SDKPiL.¹⁰⁹

As had been the case since 1906, by leaning on the leverage provided by the Bolsheviks, the SDKPiL was able to ensure that the PPS-Left would either have

105 Kasprzakowa 1965, pp. 141–240.

106 Strobel 1974, pp. 645–50.

107 Tych 1960, pp. 116–24.

108 Dzierżyński would soon go on to head the Soviet secret police (the ‘Cheka’). Leszczyński became Stalin’s main supporter inside the Polish Communist party during the 1920s. For his efforts to purge the ‘Trotskyites’, Leszczyński was rewarded with a promotion to party head in 1929 – a post he retained until he perished in 1937 during Stalin’s ‘Great Purge’.

109 ‘1918 r., listopad, Moskwa – List Sekretariatu Sekcji i Grup PPS-Lewicy w Rosji do CK RKP(b) w sprawie wstąpienia PPS-Lewicy do RKP(b)’ [1918], in Wydziału Historii Partii KC PZPR 1956, p. 162.

to dissolve itself or remain excluded from the international Marxist movement. Facing this dilemma, the PPS-Left decided in 1918 that the urgent need to form a united Communist party in Poland weighed heavier than any ongoing differences with the SDKPiL. Thus in December 1918 the PPS-Left co-founded with the SDKPiL the new Communist party on the basis of a platform affirming Luxemburg and the SDKPiL's longstanding position on Polish independence. After twenty-five years, Luxemburg's party had finally overcome its PPS rivals.¹¹⁰

Luxemburg was not personally involved in these developments, as she was in jail in Germany until November 1918. But the approach of the SDKPiL leaders was explicitly and consciously based on Luxemburg's longstanding positions on Polish independence and the PPS.¹¹¹ Testifying to Luxemburg's continued ideological hegemony, her Polish comrades in 1918 requested that she give a green light to their organisational and political approach during this critical period. Rosa Luxemburg's final action in the Polish socialist movement, before she was murdered in January 1919 by German counter-revolutionaries, was to give her approval from Berlin to the founding programme of the new Polish Communist Workers' Party, which declared that 'the Polish proletariat rejects all political slogans such as autonomy, independence, self-determination ... For the international camp of social revolution there is no question of borders.'¹¹²

Such a stance proved to be politically disastrous at a moment when Polish working people were generally euphoric about the conquest of state independence – even SDKPiL leader Julian Marchlewski noted that Polish workers demonstrated 'a surge of patriotism, in the best sense of the word'.¹¹³ Proletarian enthusiasm for an independent Poland did not mean support for capitalism – indeed, one of the reasons why independence was so popular was it was proclaimed by a socialist-led provisional government which denounced capitalist tyranny and exploitation, called for the rule of Polish working people, and promised to nationalise the major industries and forcibly expropriate the landed estates.¹¹⁴

110 On the PPS-Left's unification with the SDKPiL, see Strobel 1974, pp. 651–87.

111 *Sprawozdanie ze Zjazdu Organizacyjnego KPRP. Zjednoczenie SDKPiL i PPS Lewicy. Warszawa 1919*, pp. 4–5 (Dokumenty życia społecznego, Biblioteka Narodowa).

112 *Sprawozdanie ze Zjazdu Organizacyjnego KPRP. Zjednoczenie SDKPiL i PPS Lewicy. Warszawa 1919*, p. 9 (Dokumenty życia społecznego, Biblioteka Narodowa).

113 Marchlewski 1920, p. 28.

114 *Do Ludu Polskiego. Robotnicy, Włościanie i Żołnierze Polscy! Lublin-Kraków, 7 listopada 1918* (Biblioteka Śląska). The provisional government was headed by Ignacy Daszyński, the leader of the PPS's sister group in Austrian Poland. By this time, Pilsudski had left the PPS-Revolutionary Faction (renamed simply as the PPS in 1909). The PPS made a shift towards the left during World War One and merged with the 'Austrian' and 'Prussian' PPS

Yet influential Polish Communist leaders from the SDKPiL called for military intervention by the Russian soviet regime into Poland – indeed, SDKPiL émigré leaders in Russia played a central role in initiating and implementing the Bolsheviks' catastrophically misguided invasion of Poland in the summer of 1920.¹¹⁵ 'The error made by us (former SDKPiL members) was rejecting Polish independence.... Negating independence completely, we thus lost the struggle for an independent Soviet Poland', Dzierżyński later admitted.¹¹⁶

By 1923, the Polish Communist party had come to see the dire consequences of its initial orientation. At its historic Second Congress in the autumn of 1923, the party reversed many of Luxemburg and the SDKPiL's traditional positions and advocated Polish independence, a workers' united front, and land to the peasants.¹¹⁷ But this political evolution had come too late, as November 1923 marked the end of the revolutionary wave in Poland and across Europe.

The defeat of the Polish revolution was not a minor or inconsequential episode. Marxists for many decades had viewed Poland as the powder-keg which could blow up the German, Russian, and Austrian regimes – indeed, it was precisely because of Poland's strategic importance for the revolution in Germany that the Bolsheviks had invaded in 1920.¹¹⁸ But despite favourable revolutionary conditions, Poland and the Tsarist borderlands ended up constituting more of a barrier than a bridge to the international extension of the workers' revolution.

Rosa Luxemburg's participation in Polish socialism was deeply contradictory and, in the end, tragic. Without her tremendous revolutionary prestige and political strengths it is unlikely that the sectarian SDKPiL could have ever played such an influential part in Polish and European history. A serious

counterparts in early 1919. By tying its support for Polish independence to workers' immediate demands, the left-reformist PPS proved able during the war and revolution to overcome the former hegemony of the radical Marxists in the Polish labour movement. On the role of the PPS in the revolution, see Holzer 1962.

115 Former SDKPiL leader Joseph Unszlicht in particular played a crucial role in feeding into Lenin's mistaken hope that a Red Army invasion would be greeted by the Polish proletariat (Trembicka 1986–7, pp. 178–9).

116 Cited in Warski 1966 [1929], p. 611.

117 *Komunistyczna Partia Robotnicza Polski* 1968.

118 Analysing the 1920 'catastrophe', Trotsky noted that 'the error in the strategic calculations in the Polish war had great historical consequences. The Poland of Pilsudski came out of the war unexpectedly strengthened. On the contrary, the development of the Polish revolution received a crushing blow. The frontier established by the [1921] Riga treaty cut off the Soviet Republic from Germany, a fact that later was of great importance in the lives of both countries.' (Trotsky 1970, p. 459.)

balance-sheet of Luxemburg's legacy cannot focus solely on her positive impact in Germany and beyond – it must also acknowledge her particularly problematic role in Poland.

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