

Georg Adler, Peter Hudis, and Annalies Laschitzka, eds., *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, trans. George Shriver (New York and London: Verso Books, 2011)

***Socialism and Democracy*, No. 58 (2012)**

This is the first volume of a projected 14-volume set, *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg*, comprising all of Luxemburg's extant writings, prepared jointly by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Karl Dietz Verlag and Verso Books.¹ It contains 230 letters by Luxemburg to 46 different people as well as 16 pages of photos, and is George Shriver's translation of the 1990 German text, *Herzlichst, Ihre Rosa* (*Warmly from the heart, Yours, Rosa*).

Annalies Laschitzka's Introduction gives detailed information on the correspondence, the history of its preservation during the Nazi occupation of Europe, and the important role played by publication of some of the letters in the renewed appreciation of Luxemburg, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. (Stalin had put her under a cloud for decades by labeling her a "semi-Menshevik" and calling for a "struggle against Luxemburgism.") Shriver's "Translator's Note" is useful, as are the glossary of names, lists of abbreviations and of contemporary periodicals, explanatory footnotes, and a reasonably thorough Index. Also of interest is a note listing the archival locations of the originals. The main thing I found lacking was a chronology of Luxemburg's life, which would clarify the circumstances under which the letters were written (many were from prison). A detailed Table of Contents, listing each letter, would also have been helpful. Overall, however, Verso is to be congratulated for producing a splendid scholarly work.

The letters themselves are a literary treat. Although Rosa Luxemburg was a highly political person, her letters are anything but narrow political commentaries, and this is where her "multidimensionality as a thinker and a person" comes fully into play, as noted by Peter Hudis in his Introduction. Interestingly, most of the correspondence here consists of personal letters to friends and lovers, where the political commentary (which is quite extensive) enters casually, as the shared discussion and understanding among intimates. While it is not surprising that she would have active friendships with Sophie Liebknecht, wife of left-winger Karl Liebknecht; Henriette Roland Holst, left-wing socialist in Holland; and Clara Zetkin, leading left-wing German socialist, Luxemburg also remained close personal friends with Luise Kautsky, wife of Karl Kautsky, even after she had broken with him politically (in 1910), and with Mathilde Wurm, wife of Emmanuel Wurm, both social-democratic centrists in the USPD.² Not that Luxemburg pulls her political punches—for indeed there is much direct criticism of Karl Kautsky and other leading members of the SPD, and of the SPD's deadly routinism and lack of imagination, as well as an honest assessment of the enthusiastic revolutionary youth attracted to the Spartacus League but untried by experience (in this way much like the enthusiastic but untried 1960s New Left

youth in the US and elsewhere). And she is highly critical of Lenin in several of these letters. Yet there always remains a civility even in her sharpest criticisms of leading personalities, a determination on her part to separate the ideas which she opposes from the actual persona of the person expressing them.

Further, by certain standards that have been much in vogue for decades on what it means to be “left political,” Luxemburg is positively “bourgeois”! She has an active interest in botany, she eagerly takes up drawing and painting, and she loves walking in the gardens of her residence, in the Black Forest, and in Switzerland. She enjoys without condescension the daily life she observes during her stays in Genoa and Levanto, Italy, and writes of those places at length in two letters to Luise Kautsky. She greatly appreciates Goethe and Mozart, mentioning them several times. And she deeply regrets that when her father was dying she was at the International Socialist Conference in Paris, not by his side. Luxemburg is also an avid reader of the novels of her day, very fond of her cat Mimi, and often ends her letters with notes of love from both Mimi and herself. Finally, while imprisoned in the Wronke fortress, she befriends and feeds the titmice that come to her window ledge, and eagerly observes the flowers that grow and the small animals that scurry beneath her cell window.

Of course there’s much that’s directly political in the usual left-wing sense and much that is revealing about the inner life of the socialist parties of Luxemburg’s time. But these are scattered throughout the correspondence as *bons mots*; while integral to each letter in which they are contained, they are not systematic attempts to formulate political documents and polemics as such. These letters remain above all intensely personal; the political enters into them because her friends and lovers are themselves also political, so the focus is natural.

Moreover, Luxemburg’s letters are extremely well written, elegant in their use of language and exciting in their expression of ideas. They show just how much we have lost with the decline of letter-writing. E-mails may be more timely and direct as means of communication, but taking the time to actually correspond (as Luxemburg did throughout her life), to actually compose a letter, produces art as well as communication. That is what’s at the heart of *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, and what makes the book so absorbing.

The letters paint a vivid self-portrait of their author, both as a revolutionary socialist and as a fully-rounded, highly accomplished, educated (Ph.D. in economics), intelligent person who worked her way up to the top echelons of the SPD and was a key player in the Second International despite the triple handicap of being a woman, a Jew, and an ardent left-winger who chafed at routinism and bureaucratism. While not a feminist as generally understood today, Luxemburg definitely viewed women’s emancipation as part and parcel of the liberation of the working class as a whole through socialism, and certainly was so actively pro-woman that she is justly admired by many present-day feminists. Further, while broadly supportive of Bolshevik positions, she was also critical of the Bolsheviks and of Lenin specifically, and a fierce critic of the Bolshevik use of terror following the

revolution, even as she conceded that it resulted from Russia's backwardness and the failure by European socialism to support the first workers' state. Luxemburg herself died, of course, in a revolutionary attempt to overthrow capitalism in Germany.

The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg is a remarkable volume, one that we are truly blessed to have. A paperback version is forthcoming.

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Notes

1. The Editorial Board for the *Complete Works* consists of George Shriver and Peter Hudis as General Editors, with Paul Le Blanc, Lea Haro, Axel Fair-Schulz, William A. Pelz, and Susan Weissman.

2. Independent Social-Democratic Party of Germany, which split from the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) over support for World War I.