

## The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg

**Rosa Luxemburg was born 150 years ago today. Her letters reveal a revolutionary intellectual who was deeply committed to socialism and defiantly humane.**



Reading [\*The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg\*](#) one sometimes feels like a voyeur. Tender love notes are mixed in with daily triumphs and tragedies, accounts of visits with friends, what was had for breakfast, nervous missives to one lover written while hiding from another, romantic longings, and multiple self-deprecating jokes about her small stature and ungainly looks.

At five hundred and twelve pages, this collection, the most complete available in English, returns the personal struggles of Rosa — often omitted by earlier editors — to the life of Luxemburg. And somewhere in between hearing of an invigorating walk and watching her curate male affection to assure her writing's publication, it becomes clear why Verso begins its fourteen-volume complete works of the Polish-born, German revolutionary on such an intimate note: here is a radical portrait for the internet generation. Let's hope they pay close attention.

The last letter in the collection is dated January 11, 1919, Berlin — four days before the forty-seven-year-old Luxemburg's assassination. Born in Poland in 1871 to a middle-class, Jewish family, Luxemburg left to study economics and earn a doctorate in political theory in Switzerland. The first letter in the collection — dated July 1891 — comes just as she is finishing her studies. Among activists, Luxemburg is most renowned for [\*Reform or Revolution\*](#), a blistering riposte to the theory of evolutionary socialism advanced by Eduard

Bernstein. For scholars of Marxist political economy, it is [\*The Accumulation of Capital\*](#) that is remembered, sometimes as simply a serious contribution to the emerging theory of imperialism, and sometimes as one of the two or three works of political economy deserving mention in the same breath as Marx himself.

Luxemburg was instrumental in the rise of German Social Democrats, and, upon their betrayal at the outset of the Great War, founded, with Karl Liebknecht, the Spartacus League, which was to become the German Communist party. It was Liebknecht who, without her knowledge, ordered the ill-advised uprising against the Weimar republic that provided the pretext for their combined murder at the hands of the paramilitary *freikorps* under orders from the Social Democratic government.

Beyond this, she was a powerful speaker, a natural theorist and editor, a peer, a friend, and occasional lover to many of the leaders of the international labor and socialist movements: including Leo Jogiches, Karl Kautsky, Liebknecht, and Clara Zetkin. For all this, though, it is perhaps her letters for which she is most beloved. Even after several years on the CIA payroll, a figure as compromised as Sidney Hook still had to admit that they were “among the small literary treasures of the century.”

## An Intimate Portrait

The one hundred ninety letters included in Verso’s volume are drawn almost entirely from the German collection *Herzlichst Ihre Rosa*, first published in 1990 under the editorial guidance of Luxemburg scholars Annelies Laschitzka and Georg Adler. The vast majority of these are addressed to Luxemburg’s long-term lover and political partner, Leo Jogiches and the same is true of the Verso edition.

Two decades later, translator George Shriver has consulted some of the Polish and German-language originals to get a better handle on Luxemburg’s multi-lingual style. Shriver’s previous English translations are notable, including Roy Medvedev’s *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, and Mikhail Gorbachev’s *Gorbachev: On My Country and the World*. Luxemburg wrote in Polish, German, Russian, and French, often in combination, while sprinkling in English or Latin. Shriver occasionally leaves certain lines in their original form to illustrate the erudite timbre of the prose.

Accompanying an extensive glossary of personal names, abbreviations, and publications, the Verso edition also boasts more letters and footnotes than the German version, these being the only thing remotely dull or academic about the text. In a collection that reproduces, translates, and combines hundreds of hand-written and couriered documents from all across Europe, the editors account for the movement, handling, archiving and storage of the physical pages themselves, which makes for a compelling glimpse into history at work. These letters will give those unfamiliar with their author’s importance valuable insight into her brilliant and unfashionable way of thinking.

For the uninitiated, the Letters, with all their exquisite details, read as well as any novel: we learn how Luxemburg’s Persian cat, Mimi, behaved in the presence of Lenin; how much money she borrowed to keep her numerous publications in the hands of intellectuals and workers; which volumes of German literature she craved; and we hear her pleading with friends to take care of her rent while she was in prison for inciting crowds to riot. Even when some of the details threaten to drag, Luxemburg’s sudden, lyrical moments and proverbial winks at her intended audience suggest thrilling secrets. We feel her grinning, her wrist undulating furiously as her hands fight to keep pace with her thoughts.

Tracking Luxemburg’s relationships with men is fascinating. For Leo Jogiches, initial admiration and respect slowly transforms into frustration at an overly paternal figure. Growing bolder, she chastises him, both for not paying her enough affection and for not giving her enough information about his personal life (she clearly valued telling others about

hers). Before things are even over with Jogiches, we find love letters of a more patronising tone, addressed to Kostya Zetkin. Luxemburg's terms of endearment switch from "precious gold" for Jogiches to "little boy," for Zetkin. She wonders if the latter will ever understand economics, and more freely lets her literary tastes dictate his.

One reason why reading hundreds of pages of personal correspondence is so invigorating is because Luxemburg's mind never had a chance to slow with age. Even when complaining of exhaustion, she writes with such energy as to suggest that she never stopped thinking. Her multiple stays in prison become needed respite — quality time spent in cells with other radicals, or alone focusing on her work. Luxemburg's most celebrated text — *The Accumulation of Capital* — was written in one season-long sitting, and never saw a second draft. Moreover, she claims to a trusted friend that she wrote it for an audience of one. As Luxemburg said of her revelatory economic treatise while imprisoned in 1917:

I know very well, Hånschen [Hans Diefenbach], that my economic works are written as though "for six persons only." But actually, you know, I write them for only one person: for myself. The time when I was writing the [first] *Accumulation of Capital* belongs to the happiest of my life. Really I was living as though in euphoria . . . Do you know, at that time I wrote the whole 20 signatures [Bogen] all at one go in four months' time — an unprecedented event! — and without rereading the *brouillon* [the rough draft], not even once, I sent it off to be printed.

But with *Accumulation*, as with her letters, there was never an audience of one. Imagining each set of hands that physically received each of these pages during their century of existence is dizzying. There is first the recipient of Rosa's warm musings and chilling observations; the jilted lover, say, scouring for terms of endearment; then the bereaved friend seeking comfort and memory after learning of Rosa's murder; then a committed archivist who would soon find a similar fate in the hands of paramilitary troops; and finally, the scholars, translators, and editors who have provided dates and cities to every party meeting mentioned. And every so often, when Luxemburg references one of her own published works in a letter, we get this footnote: "see full text in the following volume of this series": a wonderful reminder of how much more there is to come.

Personal or political, Rosa Luxemburg's letters are beautiful, powerful, and succinct. There is also a certain lingering sadness as Rosa could never quite master the exchange of love — the proportions are always off — and her slightly more than occasional longings for a bobo [child] remained unfulfilled.

## A Public Intellectual

The editors claim that something of Luxemburg's role in the intellectual legacy of Marxism can be gleaned from a careful reading: "Our aim is for this volume," Hudis states, is to provide a new vantage point for getting to better know and appreciate Rosa Luxemburg's distinctive contribution to Marxism. We hope that it will enable us to grasp what she herself consciously struggled to give expression to throughout her life: "I want to affect people like a clap of thunder, to inflame their minds not by speechifying but with the breadth of my vision, the strength of my conviction, and the power of my expression"

Yet from this text alone the specificity of Luxemburg's unique contribution to Marxism remains ambiguous. She often encourages her friends to read Marx and when she speaks of writing Reform or Revolution, she appears a staunch-enough Marxist. But in her introduction to J.P. Nettl's seminal biography, Hannah Arendt questions whether Luxemburg was a really a Marxist at all: "Mr. Nettl rightly states that to [Luxemburg], Marx was no more than 'the best interpreter of reality of them all . . . (and) what mattered most in her view was reality, in all its wonderful and all its frightful aspects, even more than revolution itself.'"

Regardless, whatever role Luxemburg actually plays in the history of Marxist thought cannot

be discerned from her *Letters*. Her view on the role of the intellectual, however, can be. A public intellectual, Luxemburg participated directly in two revolutions, and offered timely, widely publicised commentary on others. She stood at the forefront of political action, siding with the working class, but never abandoning her role as a publisher, editor, writer, and speaker. These were the positions, after all, that might allow Luxemburg to affect people like a clap of thunder.

In an introduction for the German edition, Laschitzka emphasises Luxemburg's womanhood, claiming that, "at the same time, through all kinds of difficult situations she remained a woman, with the human strengths and weaknesses and the same problems as any other woman" This is an asinine and offensive statement, meaningless past the point of being patronizing. Even in a mere twenty-one years, it has aged poorly. One need only substitute any male historical figure to see as much:

At the same time, through all kinds of difficult situations, [Abraham Lincoln/Vladimir Lenin/Fredrick Douglass] remained a man, with the human strengths and weakness and the same problems as any other man.

Whatever may be said of Rosa Luxemburg, (Or Lincoln, or Douglass . . .) it is certainly not the case that she had the same problems, strengths or weaknesses as any other woman, or any other anyone, for that matter. That she didn't is precisely what makes her so remarkable. And if editors make perhaps too much of her gender, they do the same for her position as a Polish Jew. These unchangeable facts about Luxemburg — her youth, her expatriate status in Germany, her gender, and her ethnic background certainly make her achievements even more impressive but the implication here comes dangerously close to the kind of "pretty smart for a polish chick," paternalism that's best left in 1990.

She rarely stresses her identity or complains about hostility towards her as an independently minded woman, as a Jew, or as a foreigner in Berlin. Instead, she focuses on ideas and celebrates life. Let us remember Luxemburg for rising above the pig-headedness of her fellow radicals, certainly, but if we read her own, candid words carefully, we find plenty to celebrate strictly in what she had to say and how she said it.

All that aside, I wholeheartedly agree with the editors that this collection will intensify the reader's appreciation of Luxemburg as a writer and as a historical figure. This volume does not lend any landmark insight into Luxemburg's political thought, nor does it stand alone as a triumph of feminism. What it does instead is provide an essential portrait of a committed intellectual.