

06 Luxemburg and the Russian Revolution

March 2009

Key points

- Communism represents five things
- Russian Revolution history
- Luxemburg's critique of the Russian Revolution

I. Communism represents five things

- x. Communism represents five things [use overhead; get from Marx notes]
- x. Q: So what went wrong? How could something so good end up in murder, misery, and the gulag?
- x. The historical high point—and the beginning of the fall—of communism lies in the Russian Revolution.

II. The First Russian revolution

x. Background social conditions

x. In 1905, Russia was a European power due to its size, but it was still basically a **feudal country**. The serfs had only been emancipated by law in the 1860s and in practice they were still tied to the land until the 1890s. 80% of the population were peasants, the aristocracy still had complete control of the government (no parliament, no parties, no independent local governments, etc.). The industrial working class was only about 3 million people out of about 130 million total population.

x. But its **economy had been industrializing** and growing rapidly for 30 years. Russia lacked a significant middle class of capitalists, professionals, and bureaucrats. The nobility still dominated these areas. But they had created a small but influential industrial proletariat. And this proletariat was influenced by Marxism.

x. The **Russian proletariat** was small but **exceptionally militant**. There were no tradition of trade unions and a lot of police repression, and so worker action quickly and frequently led to confrontation with the state. See 20-21

x. Bookchin argues that **the first generation of proletarians are the most radical**, because they still remember their peasant lifestyle and can compare their current life unfavorably toward it, but also know how to cooperate to fight capitalism. Proletarianization creates revolutionary conditions, he argues, but not being a proletarian.

x. **Russian Marxism**

x. All Russian Marxists viewed the emergence of industrial capitalism as progressive, because they liked industrialization. They debated how to achieve communism.

x. Some argued that Russia had to pass through a **capitalist stage of development** and that Marxists' historic task was to facilitate the transformation from feudal to bourgeois power by supporting the latter, and to protect the working class as it went through this phase. And after all, the Russian prole was tiny, it was largely a peasant society, and it didn't have much of an industrial base.

x. Others, such as Lenin and Luxemburg, argued that Russia could and should **pass over the capitalist stage** and go straight from feudalism to communism.

x. In 1903 the Russian Social-Democratic Party, a Marxist organization that existed mostly in exile in Europe, split between those who supported the first position (the **Mensheviks**) and those who supported Lenin and the latter position (**Bolsheviks**).

x. Lenin believed that the **proletariat could only develop a "trade-union consciousness"** on its own and that it could only develop a revolutionary one with the guidance of the vanguard party (31). [Is this where Kramer is coming from in his critiques of your notion of leadership?]

x. **1905: The first revolution**

x. In 1904, **Russia goes to war** with Japan. In January 1905 workers hold a peaceful anti-government demonstration in Petersburg, soldiers fired on them, and the 1905 revolution began. (Note how many revolutions are prefaced by wars.)

x. Liberals controlled this revolution. The result was that Czar Nicholas II agreed to create a parliament, the Duma. But there were also many peasant uprisings in the countryside, and the workers in the big cities began to spontaneously (without direction from any party or organization) create councils or **soviets** in the factories. They would create these soviets again in 1917. The creation of these soviets shocked Lenin and many Marxist revolutionaries, because it showed that the **workers were much more radical than the Marxist organizations**. Lenin learned a lesson from this.

x. But the Czar eventually brought these uprisings under control. Russia remained essentially a police state until 1917.

x. In 1914, **WWI breaks out**. Russia enters on side of Britain and France against Germany, Austro-Hungarian Empire, Ottoman Empire. Lenin, from exile in Europe, rooted for a defeat of Russia, which would lead to civil war, he believed. 37-38

III. The Russian Revolution (1917-1938)

x. The Russian Rev can be divided into five general stages

x. February 1917

x. In February 1917, the **Czar's regime collapses** under pressures of war, demonstrations and uprisings, and elites' withdrawal of support (40). Nicholas II abdicates.

x. Creation of the **Provisional Government**:

x. Reemergence of the **soviets**: Soviets in the factories again emerge spontaneously. The Petrograd Soviet was the key soviet.

x. The Dual Power

x. At first, liberals set it up so that the Provisional Govt (controlled by them) and the Soviets (controlled by the workers) would share power. But this **dual power** was inherently unstable and could not last.

x. Most **Marxists were shocked** and a little miffed by the workers' radicalness. They were going too far, too fast, and were more radical than they were (see, e.g.52-55). The Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries who led the executive committee of the Petrograd Soviet saw their role as to safeguard workers' interests while the bourgeois revolution ran its course, not to take over society (47). The workers weren't following "proper" Marxist theory, which they believe dictated that this should be a bourgeois revolution. The workers, meanwhile, were increasingly angry at these socialist parties.

x. **Read Fitzpatrick 49.**

x. But Lenin, who didn't arrive back in Russia until April 1917, learned a lesson from 1905 and made sure the Bolsheviks through their full support behind the workers' slogan "All power to the Soviets!"

x. **Read Fitzpatrick 42-43.**

x. It's interesting that dual power was at first a conservative demand. "All Power to the Soviets" is a call to abolish the dual power and assert workers' power over the liberal Provisional Government. 49

x. **July days, Kornilov uprising in August (58-61)**. The uprising by the right aided the Bolsheviks, since they were the only party untainted by association to the February regime. Their support among the Russian working class grew exponentially. After the Kornilov revolt is suppressed, the Bolsheviks gain a majority in the Petrograd Soviet.

x. October 1917

x. On October 24, 1917, the Bolsheviks overthrow the Provisional Government in an almost bloodless coup. The dual power was now over, and the Bolsheviks were in full control.

x. February 1917 was a workers' uprising; October was a Bolshevik coup.

x. Civil War (1918-1920)

x. Civil War breaks out in the middle of 1918. Bolshevik Red vs. anti-Bolshevik white armies.

x. Brest-Litovsk treaty to end the war with Germany.

x. NEP and death of Lenin

x. **Stalin, collectivization, terror**

x. Moderation

x. Lenin once defined the essence of the RR as “**soviets plus electrification**” (Arendt, OR).

- Marx, like “**All revolutionaries are enthusiasts, zealots**; all are utopians, with dreams of creating a new world in which the injustice, corruption and apathy of the old world are banished forever” (Fitzpatrick 8; use the rest of the quote, too: it’s great on the zealotry of revolutionaries). Marx is a revolutionary. To dismiss Marx as a theorist of radical democracy because of his “metapolitics” is to dismiss the revolutionary tradition in general. This is surely unfair.
- “It is in the nature of revolutions to end in disillusionment and disappointment. See 9 for full quote

IV. Rosa Luxemburg's critique of the Bolsheviks

From *The Russian Revolution* chaps. 1, 3, 5, 6, 8

x. Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919)

x. Jewish, Polish-born German Marxist. After an ill-fated workers' uprising in Berlin in 1919, she was captured by the German government and tortured and killed.

x. From June 1916 — November 1918 she was imprisoned for trying to lead a general strike against WWI. While in prison the Russian Revolution broke out and she wrote *The Russian Revolution* pamphlet to critique the Bolsheviks. (She knew Lenin personally.)

x. **Luxemburg strongly supports the Russian Revolution**, and she strongly supports it as a *proletarian* revolution rather than a bourgeois revolution.

x. Luxemburg thus rejects the stage theory view of the RR, which leads Kautsky in Germany and the Mensheviks in Russia to support an alliance with the "bourgeois liberals." Luxemburg, like Lenin, supports a class war against the bourgeois liberals once the Czar has been overthrown. She believes that all power should go to the workers' soviets.

x. She therefore **supports the Bolsheviks** rather than the Mensheviks (and Kautsky) in terms of their understanding of the nature and significance of this revolution, and she supports the Bolsheviks' seizing of power in the October revolution.

x. This distinguishes Luxemburg from criticisms of the Bolsheviks from the right, such as Kautsky, the Mensheviks, and other social democrats.

x. Yet she **critiques the Bolsheviks for suppressing popular participation** in the development of the socialist society.

x. Dictatorship of the proletariat

1. "Dictatorship" refers to **the class character of a regime**, or what social group or class held power. It does not necessarily refer to the political system of dictatorship. DoP means that the **working class holds political power**. It does not say anything about *how* they exercise power: direct democracy, etc.

2. The DoP exercises political power in part to **make sure that the bourgeoisie doesn't rise up again**. Because it comes out of capitalist society, it is still stamped with many of the economic, moral, and intellectual conditions of that older society. It will take a while to change them.

x. Luxemburg agrees that a **DoP must suppress the bourgeoisie** in order to prevent them from returning to power after a revolution, including using force if necessary. But **this is no reason to disfranchise the entire society**, as the Bolsheviks did when they dissolved the Constituent Assembly and dismissed the very notion of universal suffrage as bourgeois. How can the working class figure out how to build a communist society without a free press, without the freedom of assembly, and without the ability to participate in the affairs of the new government?

65-67

x. In order to build a communist society it is absolutely vital that the masses of the people get **training and practice in politics**. They are **learning how to build the new society**. This is especially vital given that there are no handbooks for how to build socialism. This is a completely new historical phase that Russia is going through; all we really have are a few "signposts" that indicate a general direction the new society should go in. But the details are completely new.

x. In this setting, free speech, free assembly, and the **encouragement of a plurality of ideas is absolutely vital**. "The only way to a rebirth is the school of public life itself, the most unlimited, the broadest democracy and public opinion" (71).

x. Yet the **Bolsheviks are preventing the Russian masses from participating** in politics in the name of suppressing the bourgeoisie. The DoP in Russia is suppressing the working class as well as the ruling class, and this is disastrous for building communism. 68

x. **Read 71-72**

x. Building a communist society *requires* permitting, even requiring, dissent.

x. **Read 69.**

x. Lenin and Trotsky's key error is that like Kautsky, they oppose dictatorship to democracy. But there is **no necessary contradiction between dictatorship and democracy**. The Russians should exercise the **dictatorship of the working class**, but "on the basis of the most active, **unlimited participation** of the mass of the people, of unlimited democracy" (76-77).

x. Without the participation of the masses, a tiny minority will rule in the interests of the working class, and they will stifle democracy and create a tyranny.

x. **Q:** Sound familiar?

x. "Democracy" doesn't just mean bourgeois democracy. Socialism means democracy, too. Don't surrender the term to the liberals. Build a socialist democracy, she urges. Don't crush democracy itself.

x. She argues that re cannot go together—

enemies, "extreme" v

x. "not through a maj to a majority—that is they are a majority to hegemony, through th zealous minorities. T parliamentaryism.

x. Very interesting cr Instead of pursuing th in declaring support f handed the bourgeois

was done out of sheer opportunism on their part, for the Bolsheviks were quick to dismiss the Constituent Assembly and popular representation, universal suffrage,

- what makes Lux's
notion of free speech +
assembly diff from Mill
or U.S. Const?

- (7) Lenin = DoP, not DoB

- dictatorship (DoP) plus democracy,
Lux argues.

- DoP + democracy vs. DoB + democracy

Bolsheviks and SR's)
it's friends and

revolutionary tactics
ries don't wait until
new majority, a new
ften due to the work of
jeois

tion" in chap. 3.
alism, the Bolsheviks,
surrounding nations,
ar: nationalism. This

the free press, and other dem liberties, but then they support “self-determination” within the (former) Russian empire. It’s cynical and it gives the bourgeoisie a weapon.

x. **Lumpenproletariat:** Roughly translates to “slum proletariat.” Good definition of the classic conception of the lumpen, 73.

x. she basically argues that only “the kindling of revolutionary idealism” and “conditions of unlimited political freedom” can undermine the reactionary tendencies of the lumpen, not martial law. “Indeed, every persistent regime of martial law leads inevitably to arbitrariness, and every form of arbitrariness tends to deprave society” (74).

Communism:

The full development of our human capacities through the abolition of social classes and capitalism.

Communism represents five things:

1. Collective control of the means of production (centralized or decentralized)
2. A critique of capitalism
3. A method of interpreting history
4. A strategy for political change
5. Democracy: giving people a say in those affairs that affect their daily life, especially those economic affairs.