Chapter 4

Walter Rodney's *Russian Revolution* and the Curious Case of Rosa Luxemburg

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In 1971, the Guyanese Marxist historian Walter Rodney had begun work on a book about the Russian Revolution and the political lessons it could offer revolutionaries in Africa and the Caribbean. He drafted what amounted to twenty typewritten lectures before setting the project aside in order to work on his pathbreaking *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. He never returned to the Russian material. In 1974, Rodney returned to Guyana and immersed himself in the struggle to challenge the dictatorial rule of President Forbes Burnham—a decision for which he paid the ultimate price. On June 13, 1980, the brilliant 38-year-old historian was assassinated.

His wife, Pat Rodney, fled Guyana with her children and temporarily left Walter's papers with Edward Alpers, a professor of African history at UCLA. In 1984, Alpers hired me as his graduate assistant and tasked me with organizing, transcribing, and annotating Rodney's lectures on the Russian Revolution with the intention of completing the book. Thirty-four years later, following a very long hiatus and help from my co-editor Jesse Benjamin, the book was published as *The Russian Revolution: A View from the Third World* (Verso, 2018).[1] Covering the gamut from pre-revolutionary movements to Stalinist economic planning, Rodney masterfully examines the challenges of socialist transformation in a "backwards" empire, the consolidation of state power, debates within Marxist circles over the character of Russia's revolution, and the ideological bases of historical interpretation. Rather than produce a narrative history, Rodney chose to interrogate the meaning, representation, and significance of the Russian Revolution as a world historical

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[1] The history of the manuscript and its construction are detailed in Kelley and Benjamin (2018).

event the reverberations of which profoundly shaped Marxist thought, Third World liberation movements, and theories of socialist transformation.

Impressive as it is, *The Russian Revolution* is an unfinished work.[2] We will never know what arguments he would have developed or revised if given the opportunity to complete the book. Yet, even in its unfinished state, one facet of the book struck me as curious: his brief, uncharacteristically dismissive treatment of Rosa Luxemburg. After all, Luxemburg was a celebrated radical thinker, the author of *The Accumulation of Capital* whose insights on imperialism anticipated Rodney's own approach to theories of underdevelopment, and the first Marxist sympathetic to the Bolsheviks to raise critical questions about the direction of the October Revolution. In just over three pages, Rodney took Luxemburg's lengthy pamphlet, *The Russian Revolution* (drafted in September 1918), to task for criticizing Bolshevik policy—namely, Lenin's decision to suspend the Constituent Assembly, limit suffrage, and severely restrict the press; Lenin's support for the right of self-determination for nations within the Russian empire; and the Bolshevik policy of land redistribution to the peasantry on the grounds that it would not challenge private ownership of property. With respect to land policy, he agreed with Luxemburg in principle but not in practice. "On strictly theoretical grounds, she was correct," he added, "but it was precisely in the interest of promoting a democratic alliance of workers and peasants that the Bolsheviks agreed to suspend collectivization of the land" (Rodney, 2018: 115). Thus, while acknowledging her bona fides as a "revolutionary Marxist," Rodney regarded Luxemburg as a bundle of contradictions and naïve about the requirements for seizing and holding state power. "So Rosa Luxemburg was against democracy for the peasants and she was against independence and autonomy for nationalities. She was in favor of democracy for the bourgeoisie, refusing to agree with the Bolsheviks that they should be disenfranchised" (Rodney, 2018: 116). He grudgingly conceded that her naïve expectations for the present may have enabled her to foresee the future problems of the Stalinist bureaucratic state: "In a curious way, Luxemburg's criticisms had more relevance to the future than to the time she wrote. It was the long-term consequences of the dialectical relations between Lenin and the Central Committee, between the Central Committee and the members, between the bureaucracy and the people" (Ibid).

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[2] The "manuscript" consisted of about twenty lectures, most written out in prose with schematic sections without footnotes or citations beyond an occasional parenthetical reference to an author. I reorganized the lectures into nine coherent chapters, eliminated duplication or repetition, and furnished all of the footnotes. See Kelley and Benjamin (2018).

Rodney followed this observation with a chilling and peculiarly gendered assertion tying her failed analysis to her own assassination in 1919. "This refusal to see," he wrote,

> that in a revolution one had to realize that a class opponent was a mortal enemy led to Luxemburg's own death. Her party in Germany was caught up in a revolutionary situation in 1919, and she was slow to act. Instead, the bourgeois reactionaries captured her and murdered her in cold blood. That was the price which she paid for not recognizing that a revolution is not a tea-party. Her own subsequent experience tragically and cruelly exposes the limitations of her analysis of the Russian situation in 1918. (Ibid)

I've always found this passage discomfiting, not only because his impetuous comment that political misjudgment led to her death mirrors the story surrounding Rodney's own assassination, but because it is out of character with Rodney's political orientation. Indeed, Luxemburg and Rodney share eerily parallel political trajectories. Both were intellectual wunderkinds from middle-class families under colonial, racial, ethnic, and/or religious domination. Luxemburg, a Jew from Tsarist-controlled Poland, earned her doctorate in economics at age 26; Rodney, who grew up in British-ruled Guyana, earned his doctorate in African history at the age of 24. Both were committed Marxist internationalists who moved seamlessly between the academy and the streets, brilliant stump speakers capable of conveying the most complex ideas to working people without condescension or jargon. Both deepened their politics in exile: Luxemburg in Switzerland and Germany; Rodney in England, Jamaica, and Tanzania. Most importantly, both embraced an orientation toward working-class self-activity and mass insurgency as the driver rather than consequence of revolutionary thought. And while Rodney has never invoked or cited Luxemburg in his other published work, during his last years in Guyana, he wrestled with the very questions she posed about democracy, dictatorship, national liberation, and world revolution from her jail cell and in the streets of Berlin. I want to suggest that, as Jane Anna Gordon has written about Frantz Fanon's relationship to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Rodney "might be understood as a kindred spirit" and perhaps a "better intellectual heir" to Luxemburg than to Lenin (Gordon, 2014: 9). They lived in different times and places but found through praxis—the dialectical engagement with Marxist thought and working-class self-activity—the condition of possibility for revolution.

LUXEMBURG AND THE BOLSHEVIKS

Rosa Luxemburg spent much of her adult life supporting, writing about, and criticizing revolutionary movements in Russia as well as Russian Social

Democratic leadership. From her 1904 essay "Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy" to her assessment of the 1905 Revolution in *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions* (1906), to her pseudonymous *The Junius Pamphlet* (1915), she had been both a champion and unsparing critic of Russia's revolutionary leadership, including the iconic Lenin. Yet, she was often ideologically closer to Lenin than to the leadership of her own German Social Democratic Party (SPD). When Karl Kautsky, the SPD's main theorist, concurred with party leader Edouard Bernstein that socialist revolution would come about through the inevitable growth of the socialist vote, 28-year-old Luxemburg was the lone dissenter in the party's inner circle. Anticipating some of Lenin's arguments in *What Is to Be Done?* (1902), in 1900 she published the pamphlet *Social Reform or Revolution*, which argued unequivocally that socialism cannot be voted into power, that revolution is unavoidable, and that capitalism's illusory stability was the result of imperialist expansion.

When the February revolution broke out in 1917, resulting in the overthrow of the Tsar and the creation of a provisional government, Luxemburg was confined to a jail cell in Poland's Wronki prison. In 1914, she had broken with the SPD over its support for war and joined Karl Liebknecht, Franz Mehring, and Clara Zetkin to form the militantly anti-war movement "The International," later renamed the Spartacus League. Their effort to organize a general strike against the war landed Luxemburg and Liebknecht in prison. By July, as the Bolshevik slogans of "Peace Land, and Bread" and "All Power to the Soviets" gained adherents from the masses and provoked strikes and mutinies by soldiers, sailors, and workers, Luxemburg was transferred to a prison in Breslau where she was subjected to even greater restrictions. Nevertheless, through correspondence and press reports, she followed events in Russia with great enthusiasm as well as caution (Nettl, 2019 [1966]: 679–690; Kemmerer, 2016: 855–856). She applauded the Bolshevik seizure of power in October but worried that unless revolution spreads to Europe, its future might be in jeopardy. In a letter to Luise Kautsky dated November 24, 1917, she conceded that hindering the Bolshevik's struggle to establish a socialist state and advance the cause of proletarian internationalism was the toxic nationalism and imperialism that led Europe to war in the first place. If the Bolsheviks fail, she wrote, it will be "because the Social Democracy in the highly developed West consists of miserable cowardly dogs, who, while looking on calmly, will let the Russians bleed to death. But a downfall like that is better than 'living on for the Fatherland'" (Luxemburg, 2011: 452). Lenin certainly agreed. In his "Report on Peace" issued immediately after the seizure of power, Lenin directly appealed "to the class-conscious workers" of Great Britain, France, and Germany to join the revolution and resist the war, implying that the fate of the Russian Revolution depends on their "comprehensive, determined, and supremely vigorous action" (Lenin, 1917a). A few months later, Lenin put it more succinctly: "without the German revolution we shall perish" (Serge, 1949 [1930]).

Initially, Luxemburg had reason to be optimistic. By 1917, opposition to the war was widespread across the continent. In Germany, the Independent Social Democrats, former SPD members expelled for anti-war activism, formed an alliance with the Spartacus League. Mutinies occurred in the French and British armies as well as the German navy, and some 200,000 German metal workers went on strike. In January 1918, a wave of strikes swept through Austria-Hungary and Germany, involving half a million metal workers in Vienna and Berlin. Then on March 3, 1918, Lenin made an about face and signed the Brest-Litovsk treaty with Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire, acceding to Germany's terms of annexation in exchange for peace. Lenin signed the treaty believing that it would be short-lived, annulled by the success of the impending German Revolution (Smith, 2017: 157). And the fledgling state needed a respite from war. Luxemburg was incensed. A genuine peace agreement between Russia and Germany was unthinkable under SPD rule. The treaty, she predicted, would choke the German proletariat, strengthen German militarism under the SPD, and leave Russia in an especially vulnerable position. Luxemburg was hardly alone in her assessment. The Brest-Litovsk treaty generated the Bolshevik's greatest political crisis to date. Nicolai Bukharin, who led what was then identified as the Left Communist faction, took a position identical to Luxemburg, arguing that signing the treaty meant abandoning the German revolution. Trotsky also did not back a peace agreement, and he and his supporters ultimately abstained from the vote. Lenin prevailed but by a very slim majority (Ibid; Trotsky, 2008 [1932]: 898–899).

The Bolsheviks paid dearly for what turned out to be a temporary peace. The treaty granted Germany possession of the Baltic provinces and a large part of Belorussia and Ukraine, depriving Russia access to one-third of its agricultural land and railways, virtually all its oil, and three-quarters of its coal and iron deposits. Luxemburg empathized with Lenin's difficult position but considered the treaty "a capitulation of the Russian revolutionary proletariat before German imperialism." It strengthened Germany's militarists, set back the revolutionary movement, and rather than end war with Germany, the treaty "merely hastened the beginning of a new phase of it" (Nettl, 2019 [1966]: 696). Against the wishes of her Spartacus comrades, Luxemburg decided to publish a short piece on the consequences of Brest-Litvosk in the *Spartakusbriefe* (Spartakus letter) in September 1918. Titled "The Russian Tragedy," she argued that the agreement encouraged counter-revolutionary movements, turning Finland, the Baltics, Ukraine, and the Caucasus into potential counter-revolutionary outposts, and that it deprived Russia of its "sources of life" (granaries, coal mines, iron-ore mines, and oil supplies) and made Germany the arbiter of Russia's "political and economic destinies." In other words, this short-term German–Russian alliance could result in the liquidation of the Bolsheviks (Nettl, 2019 [1966]: 696; Schurer, 1962: 370).

It did not. But neither did the treaty grant the Bolsheviks the respite they sought. Nor did its annulment in the wake of Germany's defeat appear to make much of a difference. Lifting the German blockade in the Baltic and Black Seas simply opened the door for foreign troops from formerly Allied countries to wage war against the Bolsheviks. The result was an increase in military personnel and weapons being brought into Soviet Russia. The Allied blockade imposed after Brest-Litovsk was maintained after the war ended (Smith, 2017: 173).

Luxemburg drafted a second letter, but the editors of *Spartakusbriefe* refused to publish it. So she vowed to write a much longer pamphlet. Paul Levi, her comrade and an editor of *Spartakusbriefe*, traveled to Breslau prison just to dissuade her, arguing that her critique—no matter how well-meaning and genuine—could be used against the Bolsheviks by counter-revolutionaries. She ignored his entreaties and wrote it anyway, dispatching a draft to Levi with the proviso that "I am writing this pamphlet only for you and if I can convince *you*, then the effort isn't wasted" (Nettl, 2019 [1966]: 698; O'Kane, 2015: 117).

Levi did receive the pamphlet in September of 1918 but he sat on it until 1922, choosing to publish it under the title, *The Russian Revolution* after his expulsion from the German Communist Party. Ironically, Levi wielded it precisely as a weapon against the Bolsheviks, though clearly this was never Luxemburg's intention. As her comrade and first biographer, Paul Frölich, put it: "She was always sparing with her hymns of praise, but she never spoke of people or of a party with so much enthusiastic approval as she did the Bolsheviks in this work" (1972: 242). The pamphlet opens celebrating the triumph of the October Revolution as "the very first experiment in proletarian dictatorship in world history." She acknowledged the tremendous challenges ahead—civil war, isolation, foreign aggression from the capitalist countries, the absolute necessity for revolution in the West—and conceded that "it would be a crazy idea to think that every last thing done or left undone in an experiment with the dictatorship of the proletariat under such abnormal conditions represented the very pinnacle of perfection." At the same time, she insisted that critical reflection is not only necessary to advance the revolution but does not diminish its accomplishments (Luxemburg, 1940 [1918]; Nettl, 2019 [1966]: 698–705; Frölich, 1972: 243–252; O'Kane, 2015: 116–120).

Besides reprising her assessment of the German–Russian peace agreement, she focuses her attention on three issues: land policy, national self-determination, and democracy. As we have already seen, Walter Rodney accuses her of being against democracy for the peasants, because she opposed redistribution in the form of private plots. But what was Luxemburg arguing for? She believed that the expropriation and nationalization of large estates would become the bases for modern "methods of agrarian production," which in turn would "serve as the point of departure for the Socialist mode of production on the land." But she was hardly absolutist on this score. "Of course," she adds, "it is not necessary to take away from the small peasant his parcel of land, and we can with confidence leave him to be won over voluntarily by the superior advantages of social production and to be persuaded of the advantages first of union in cooperatives and then finally of inclusion in the general socialized economy as a whole." Ironically, Rodney echoes Luxemburg here in his critique of Stalin's policy of collectivization of agriculture just a few pages after eviscerating her position on Bolshevik land policy. He supports socialist or collective forms of agricultural production but opposes the use of state compulsion: "as socialists desirous of transforming a rural society into a socialist society, we have to take a stand against the use of force in this context. That is a matter of principle" (Rodney, 2018: 120).

In fact, Luxemburg did not demand that the Bolsheviks move swiftly to nationalize the land or introduce socialist production techniques. Any moves in this direction were impossible under the circumstances. "That the Soviet government in Russia has not carried through these mighty reforms—who can reproach them for that! It would be a sorry jest indeed to demand or expect of Lenin and his comrades that, in the brief period of their rule, in the center of the gripping whirlpool of domestic and foreign struggles, . . . to expect that under such circumstances they should already have solved, or even tackled . . . the most difficult task of the Socialist transformation of society!" Instead, she took issue with the chaotic manner in which "land reform" was occurring. The Bolsheviks left it to peasant committees to simply expropriate the big holders and redistribute land however they wished. Luxemburg's concern was that this reproduced both the sanctity of private property and continued inequality, especially since this haphazard policy of redistribution enabled those with resources and power to secure larger landholdings. The policy also incentivized a portion of the urban proletariat to return to the countryside seeking land to own, which drained much-needed labor from cities. And she makes the prescient observation that "any attempt at socialization of agrarian production" now will face the enormous obstacle of a "newly developed and powerful mass of owning peasants who will defend their newly won property with tooth and nail against every Socialist attack."

Luxemburg's sharp criticism of the Bolshevik's policy of granting nations within the old Tsarist empire the right of self-determination should not have surprised anyone familiar with her. She had been debating Lenin on the "national question" for at least a decade, dating back to her book-length essay originally titled “The National Question and Autonomy,” published serially across five issues of the *Social Democratic Review* between 1908 and 1909 (Luxemburg, 1909). Her critics tend to paint her as dogmatically anti-nationalist, because she opposed Polish nationalism out of fear that nationalist organizations led by petit-bourgeois and bourgeois elements would overtake socialist and working-class organizations. But in “The National Question and Autonomy,” Luxemburg neither universalizes the Polish example nor is she hostile to all nationalist movements. She raises more general questions about the right of national self-determination, such as: Who constitutes the nation? Who can actually exercise that right when nations are governed by bourgeois political powers who singularly claim to express the national will? Rejecting the notion that the nation is a “homogenous sociopolitical entity,” Luxemburg concludes that in the historical present and in the struggle to dismantle class society, genuine “self-determination” should rest not with the “nation” but the proletariat—which is to say, the dictatorship of the proletariat.[3] And when military conflict engulfed Europe, she watched in horror as nationalism fueled the fires of imperialism and war. As she argued in *The Junius Pamphlet* (1915), imperialism displaced “the old bourgeois democratic program” of national development with the drive for expansion and colonial exploitation. “Today the nation is but a cloak that covers imperialistic desires, a battle cry for imperialistic rivalries, the last ideological measure with which the masses can be persuaded to play the role of cannon fodder in imperialistic wars. . . . [I]n the present imperialistic milieu there can be no wars of national self-defense” (Luxemburg, 1916; Munck, 1986: 52–53).

Not surprisingly, Lenin strongly disagreed. In his response to *The Junius Pamphlet*, he was less willing to declare bourgeois democracy dead or nationalism a dead end, especially in the colonies and “semi-colonies.” For oppressed people groaning under the weight of imperialism, national wars of liberation were no cloak but revolutionary and “inevitable” (Lenin, 1916).[4] On the latter point, Luxemburg partially agreed and expressed support for anti-colonial struggles in the past. In 1896, for example, she supported Crete’s revolt against the Turkish Empire. But her position was closer to that of Indian Communist leader M. N. Roy, who distrusted the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois elements leading anti-colonial nationalist movements. Conceding that proletarian revolution was out of the question, Roy believed that workers and peasants under the guidance of a disciplined Communist

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[3] The late Narihiko Ito penned a brilliant and thorough reading of Luxemburg’s “The National Question and Autonomy.” See Ito (2010: 4–68).

[4] To be sure, Lenin’s take on the national question was far more sophisticated and nuanced, but this is not the place to elaborate. In fact, a careful reading of the complete works of Lenin and Luxemburg will reveal more points in common than what we see on the surface. For an incisive analysis of Lenin’s shifting position on “the national question,” see Tamas Krausz (2015: chapter 4).

Party would invariably infuse nationalism with a revolutionary character. Whereas Lenin was willing to support nearly all anti-colonial movements, Roy feared that the petit-bourgeois leadership of the respective nationalist movements "would compromise with Imperialism in return for some economic and political concessions to their class" (Roy, 1964: 378).[5]

After the Bolshevik seizure of power, the "right of nations to self-determination" took on an additional valence, and Luxemburg knew it. Her pamphlet on the Russian Revolution revealed a keen understanding of Lenin's strategy of extending the right to self-determination in order to win over "the many foreign peoples within the Russian Empire to the cause of revolution." In Luxemburg's view, however, the strategy backfired since Ukraine, Lithuania, Poland, and the Baltic countries ended up allying with German imperialism against the Revolution. The losers, she insisted, were the working classes in those states bordering Russia. Nationalism hindered working-class solidarity across the old empire and strengthened the hand of the bourgeoisie in those border states.[6]

Behind land policy and the national question stood the central problem that she believed threatened the future of the first socialist state: the suppression of democracy. Just as Rodney wryly noted that she supported democracy for the bourgeoisie, but not for peasants and oppressed nations, Luxemburg charged the Bolsheviks with undermining popular democracy while championing "the 'popular vote' of the foreign nationalities of Russia on the question of which land they wanted to belong to, as the true palladium of all freedom and democracy." Her point was that building democratic institutions in Russia better advances the socialist project than promoting the self-determination of nations when the bourgeoisie still rules those nations.

Luxemburg's sympathetic critics attribute her assessment of Russia's situation to being imprisoned and thus unaware of the dire circumstances facing the Bolsheviks in 1917–1918, or, as we shall see, they argue that she changed her mind.[7] But what actually happened? How dire were the circumstances? Why did Lenin abolish the Constituent Assembly? The Bolsheviks were simply overwhelmed with crises. The new regime was beset by war on multiple fronts—the White Army (former Tsarists, right-wingers, and representatives of the *ancien regime*); foreign powers, including former Allies, concerned about a Russian–German alliance (France, England, the United States, Japan, etc.); Ukrainian and other nationalists and anti-colonial movements hostile to Bolshevik rule. After the seizure of power, the Bolsheviks were expected to participate in elections to the newly created Constituent Assembly announced before the October Revolution to replace the Provisional Government. Lenin was reluctant to participate, preferring instead the Soviet model of direct elections of workers by workers over parliamentary democracy, which he viewed as an instrument of bourgeois rule.[8] But the Bolsheviks decided to proceed with elections knowing that they probably would not get a national majority. Of the over 48 million men and women who went to the polls, 19.1 million cast their votes for the largely peasant-based Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), the Bolsheviks won 10.9 million, the Kadets 2.2 million, the Mensheviks a mere 1.5 million, and the remaining 7 million votes went to non-Russian socialist parties (mostly in Ukraine). Though dwarfed by the SRs, the Bolsheviks managed to gain the majority of workers' and at least 42 percent of the soldiers' votes.[9] When the Constituent Assembly held its opening session on January 5, 1918, tensions were high. Even before delegates sat down, Bolshevik Red Guards fired on a group of demonstrators outside, killing twelve people. The Bolsheviks insisted that the Assembly recognize Soviet power and its political program. When SR leader Viktor Chernov, the Assembly's elected chair, put forward his own agenda instead, the Bolshevik delegates walked out. The next day Lenin dissolved the Constituent Assembly.

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[5] See also John Haithcox (1971: 14–15). A copy of Roy's theses is available in V.B. Karnik (1978: 107–110). For Lenin's views on Roy's supplementary theses, see (1967: 30–37).

[6] She held fast to this position until her death. In the last few days of her life, she penned a short note critical of Woodrow Wilson's peace settlement that allowed for the creation of several new nation-states in Central Europe under the guise of national self-determination. Exhorting that national unity and harmony is predicated on "class harmony" or the arresting of class struggle, she complained, "Nationalism is at this moment the victor. On all sides nations and national groups are ganging up to claim their rights to create their own states. Mouldering corpses emergence from centuries'-old graves . . . historyless peoples, who have never formed states, are filled with a fierce drive for statehood" (Luxemburg quoted in Talmon, 2017 [1981]: 446).

[7] I discuss the debate surrounding her alleged "mistakes" and the question of her isolation below. See also Nettl (2019 [1966]: 703–705); Lukacs (1971: 277–280); Zetkin (2017 [1922]); Schurer (1962: 361–362).

Contrary to Rodney's accusations, she did not defend the bourgeoisie's right to vote or the Constituent Assembly as an instrument of proletarian democracy. She cautioned, "he who tries to apply the homemade wisdom derived from parliamentary battles between frogs and mice to the field of revolutionary tactics only shows thereby that the very psychology and laws of existence of revolution are alien to him." Accordingly, she defended the Soviets and the party's mandate, "All Power in the Hands of the proletariat and peasantry," which she contended "insured the continued development of the revolution." Rather, she argued that the annulment of the Constituent Assembly should have been followed by new elections. Securing the revolution, she insisted, required not less democracy but more: "[T]he more democratic the institutions, the livelier and stronger the pulse-beat of the political life of the masses, the more direct and complete is their influence." She opposed bourgeois democracy but found the policy of extending the franchise "only to those who live by their own labor" to be flawed. The problem with this formulation, she countered, was that it excluded the unemployed, people uprooted by economic dislocation, the urban proletariat returning to the countryside in search of land, and peasants (small landholders). And, even before Lenin implemented his New Economic Policy, Luxemburg observed elements of the petit-bourgeoisie were recruited to manage factories and run sectors of the economy. She could not fathom how they were expected to play an economic role and not demand political rights. She was not against crushing counter-revolutionary opposition by whatever means necessary, including "the deprivation of political rights, of economic means of existence, etc." What troubled her was the general disfranchisement of broad sections of the populace, "not as a concrete measure for a concrete purpose but as a general rule of long-standing effect." What's worse, she adds, was the Bolsheviks suspension of other forms of democracy—press freedom, freedom of association and assembly. She asserts: "it is a well-known and indisputable fact that without a free and untrammeled press, without the unlimited right of association and assemblage, the rule of the broad masses of the people is entirely unthinkable." The Bolsheviks made the cardinal error of substituting the dictatorship of the party for the dictatorship of the proletariat.

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[8] In *The State and Revolution*, written between August and September of 1917, Lenin wrote, "the dictatorship of the proletariat . . . as the ruling class for the purpose of suppressing the oppressors, cannot result merely in an expansion of democracy. Simultaneously with an immense expansion of democracy, which for the first time becomes democracy for the poor, democracy for the people, and not democracy for the moneybags, the dictatorship of the proletariat imposes a series of restrictions on the freedom of the oppressors, the exploiters, the capitalists. We must suppress them in order to free humanity from wage slavery, their resistance must be crushed by force; it is clear that there is no freedom and no democracy where there is suppression and where there is violence" (Lenin, 1917b).

[9] These figures come from Smith (2017: 155).

For Luxemburg, democracy was not reducible to the granting of liberal rights but principally a form of praxis. Rights shorn of mass political activity leave the old power relations intact while producing only a chimera of liberty. Socialist democracy can only be created through collective political activity involving the broadest participation of the masses. Socialism cannot be decreed. In one of the pamphlet's most powerful passages, she writes:

> The negative, the tearing down, can be decreed; the building up, the positive, cannot. New territory. A thousand problems. Only experience is capable of correcting and opening new ways. Only unobstructed, effervescing life falls into a thousand new forms and improvisations, brings to light creative new force, itself corrects all mistaken attempts. . . . Socialism in life demands a complete spiritual transformation in the masses degraded by centuries of bourgeois class rule. Social instincts in place of egotistical ones, mass initiative in place of inertia, idealism which conquers all suffering, etc., etc. No one knows this better, describes it more penetratingly; repeats it more stubbornly than Lenin. But he is

> completely mistaken in the means he employs. Decree, dictatorial force of the factory overseer, draconic penalties, ties, rule by terror-all these things are but palliatives. The only way to a rebirth is the school of public life itself, the most unlimited, the broadest democracy and public opinion. It is rule by terror which demoralizes.[10]

In the end, she never broke ranks with the Bolsheviks. She wanted the Revolution to succeed but not through authoritarian, anti-democratic means—a point she had been making since her 1904 critique of Lenin's of party "centralism" (Luxemburg, 1904, 1915).[11] But as her biographer J. P. Nettl observed, she "was far more afraid of a deformed revolution than an unsuccessful one" (Nettl, 2019 [1966]: 702). A deformed revolution, she feared, could become the model for future socialist struggles, and the only way to redirect the Russian experiment and release the masses' democratic energies was to crush the counter-revolution. And only revolution in Germany and throughout Europe could accomplish this. In other words, the European proletariat bore the primary responsibility for direction of the Russian Revolution. She made this point in a letter to her comrade Adolf Warski penned soon after her release from prison:

> The [Bolshevik] use of terror indicates great weakness, certainly, but it is directed against internal enemies who base their hopes on the existence of capitalism outside of Russia, receiving support and encouragement from it. With the coming of the European revolution, the Russian counter-revolutionaries will lose not only support [from abroad] but also—what's more important—their

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[10] There has been much written on Luxemburg's understanding of socialist democracy, especially over the course of the last two or three decades. One of the most brilliant treatments I've read is an unpublished paper by Camila Vergara, "The Materialist Constitutional Thought of Rosa Luxemburg," presented at "The Political Philosophy of Rosa Luxemburg. A Critical Assessment". Berlin, January 10–11, 2019. See also, O'Kane (2015); Bronner (1987); Dunayevskaya (1991); Nixon (2018).

[11] Published originally in *Iskra* under the title, "Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy," she repeats the point even more fervently in *The Junius Pamphlet* (1915), in which her focus was not Russian but German social democracy. She wrote: "Revolutions are not 'made' and great movements of the people are not produced according to technical recipes that repose in the pockets of the party leaders. Small circles of conspirators may organize a riot for a certain day and a certain hour, can give their small group of supporters the signal to begin . . . . The existing degree of tension between the classes, the degree of intelligence of the masses and the degree or ripeness of their spirit of resistance – all these factors, which are incalculable, are premises that cannot be artificially created by any party. That is the difference between the great historical upheavals, and the small show – demonstrations that a well-disciplined party can carry out in times of peace, orderly, well-trained performances, responding obediently to the baton in the hands of the party leaders. The great historical hour itself creates the forms that will carry the revolutionary movements to a successful outcome, creates and improvises new weapons, enriches the arsenal of the people with weapons unknown and unheard of by the parties and their leaders" (Luxemburg, 1915).

> courage. Thus the Bolshevik use of terror is above all an expression of the weakness of the European proletariat. Certainly, the agrarian relations that have been established are the most dangerous aspect, the worst sore spot of the Russian revolution. But here too there is a truth that applies—even the greatest revolution can accomplish only that which has ripened as a result of [historical] development. This sore spot also can only be healed by the European revolution. And it is coming![12]

And it was coming. As the German empire's defeat by the Allies appeared imminent, the country was beset by strikes, demonstrations, and mutinies throughout 1918, calling for the overthrow of all monarchs and the creation of a socialist republic. Workers' and Soldiers' Councils were formed in Munich, Bavaria, and other parts of the country. On November 9, SPD leader Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed a new German republic. The next day, the SPD and some leaders of the Independent Socialists (USPD) formed a government and surrendered to the Allies. Meanwhile, two hours after Scheidemann's declaration, Spartacist leader Karl Liebknecht proclaimed a "free socialist republic" and the "world revolution" before a mass crowd from the balcony of the imperial palace. Rosa Luxemburg was released from prison on that same day, and the stage was set for a showdown between the SPD and the revolutionary Left represented by the Spartacus League, elements of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, a faction of the USPD, and other left radicals. In December, they came together to found the German Communist Party (KPD).

The SPD leadership sought to replace the Soviet-styled Workers' and Soldiers' Councils with a Constituent Assembly and called for elections in January. Worried that the revolutionary Left and an insurgent workers' democracy might contest its power, the presumptive "socialist" government turned to the military for help. Seeing the forces of reaction lining up behind the SPD, Luxemburg opposed participating in the Constituent Assembly elections. Although her comrades, defenders, and detractors would argue that her opposition to the German Constituent Assembly elections proved that she had changed her mind about Lenin's decision to disband the Constituent Assembly in Russia, Luxemburg clarified in her speech to the founding congress of the KPD that the Russian and German cases were significantly different, in that an anti-Communist government ruled Germany (Nettl, 2019 [1966]). Then in January, elements on the radical Left misread rising workers' discontent as an opportunity to seize state power. Luxemburg and her comrades in the KPD and Spartacus strongly disagreed, but once the masses hit the barricades, she and Karl Liebknecht believed it was politically and ethically important

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[12] Letter to Adolf Warski, late November or early December, 1918, in Luxemburg (2011).

to support the rebellion—even if it was doomed. They resisted any attempts to negotiate with the ruling party over the heads of the masses. Targeted by the state as the masterminds behind the failed "putsch," on January 15, 1919, Luxemburg and Liebknecht were tracked down and murdered by the military. Luxemburg was never taken to jail; a concocted tale circulated that she had escaped custody and disappeared into the crowd. Five months later, her mutilated and decomposing body was discovered in a canal. Pro-government and conservative newspapers justified their deaths in the name of national security, reinforcing a state of emergency that strengthened the military and severely weakened democracy. One paper declared their deaths "proper expiation for the blood bath which they unleashed" while another described them and their party as "criminals pure and simple who without any self-restraint had long lost all power to distinguish between good and evil" (Ibid).

THE CURIOUS HISTORY OF A PAMPHLET

Sometime in December of 1921 or January of 1922, after all of the speeches, tributes, and eulogies memorializing Rosa Luxemburg began to fade into the background, her old comrade Paul Levi decided to publish her pamphlet on the Russian Revolution that he had vowed to suppress. Levi had just been expelled from the KDP and decided to deploy Luxemburg's critique as a weapon to expose Soviet errors. The publication sparked a firestorm of reaction throughout the Left. The Mensheviks immediately read the document as confirmation of their position. Menshevik leader Lulii Martov enthused in a letter to S. D. Shupak that the pamphlet "matches Kautsky in the way it raises the question of dictatorship and democracy letter-for-letter, so the effect of this publication is colossal." He grossly mischaracterized Luxemburg's position, but it didn't matter—Martov used the occasion to validate his own position.[13] Lenin himself dispatched a brief, caustic response attacking Levi as a "publicist" and opportunist and pointing out that Luxemburg was "mistaken" on every point on which they disagreed: the national question, her theory on the accumulation of capital, and her entire assessment of the Russian Revolution. He concluded, however, by calling her "an eagle" in the Communist movement and one of the great Marxist thinkers who began to gain clarity on Russia after her release from prison. For Lenin, revealing the depths of her understanding made the release of her papers an urgent matter (Lenin, 1965 [1922]).

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[13] According to Krausz (2015), the letter is dated December 21, 1921, which calls into question the generally accepted publication date of January 1922. It is possible that Martov had access to an advance copy.

The first wave of critiques came from fellow Communists, either elaborating on Lenin's remarks or doubling down on the idea that Luxemburg had abandoned her earlier position and never wanted the work published. Weeks after its publication, Georg Lukacs penned a serious and respectful, but no less damning, assessment of the document. He concludes that she was simply wrong on the national question. On the land question, she overestimated the proletarian character of the revolution and the Bolsheviks capacity to control the situation, leaving them with no choice but to mobilize "the liberated energies" of the peasantry or oppose them and therefore "isolate the proletariat . . . and thus to help the counter-revolution to victory." On democracy, she ignored the overthrow of parliamentary institutions in past revolutions and he (mistakenly) accused her of treating the Soviets as anachronistic since they anticipated a system of governance for the future socialist society rather than the present (Lukacs, 1971: 273).

Adolf Warski and Clara Zetkin, Luxemburg's longtime friends and comrades, were tasked either by the KDP or the Comintern to publish critiques of *The Russian Revolution*—Warski (1922) produced a substantial pamphlet, Zetkin an entire book (2017 [1922]).[14] They are largely responsible for promoting the narrative that Luxemburg had changed her mind on the eve of her death. Zetkin recalled Leo Jogiches, Luxemberg's partner, telling her, "Rosa no longer wanted to come out with her old criticism. She intended to write a new, larger treatise on the Russian Revolution." Having succumbed to an assassin's bullet in March of 1919, he could neither confirm nor deny the conversation. She also quoted a 1921 pamphlet by Comintern secretary and leading Polish Communist Karl Radek, asserting that by the time Luxemburg left her jail cell, "the disagreements between her and us came to an end, which is the best assurance of the fact that they were anyway not of a fundamental nature" (Zetkin, 2017 [1922]: 10–11). But Zetkin went further, waging a systematic attack on each of her arguments, even those she allegedly had abandoned. While lauding Luxemburg for her courage, commitment, and theoretical brilliance, she nevertheless took her to task for her "abstract and naïve" view of democracy and her inability to grasp the real essence of proletarian dictatorship. Much to the surprise and disdain of her old Spartacus comrades, it read very much like an apologia for the Soviet Union. At one point, Zetkin agreed with Luxemburg that:

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[14] As former allies of Paul Levi, taking down Luxemburg's *The Russian Revolution* was also a strategy to distance themselves from Levi and pledge fealty to the party line. When the Nazis outlawed the KDP in 1933, Zetkin fled to Moscow where she died at aged seventy-six. Warski also fled to Moscow, but was executed in 1937, a victim of Stalin's "Great Purge."

> The party should not become an isolated authority-wielding, oppressive entity, issuing commands to the masses. It is an indisputable fact that in Soviet Russia there are indications that the opposite is true. . . . No other party than that of the Bolsheviks so keenly spots its deficiencies and mistakes, admits to these with scrupulous honesty, and energetically seeks to overcome them. (Zetkin 2017 [1922]: 52–53)

It was an absurd claim that would become more absurd over time.

The Russian Revolution did not appear in English until 1940, and by then a more complete version of the manuscript had been discovered in the hands of a comrade who had held on to it for safekeeping (Frölich, 1972: 241). The English version was translated by Bertram D. Wolfe, a founding member of the Communist Party of America and former editor of the paper *Labor Unity*. Wolfe rose rapidly within the ranks of the Communist International and briefly served on the Executive Committee of the Mexican Communist Party before being deported back to the United States. In 1929, he was expelled from the Party for refusing a Comintern assignment and joined up with the Jay Lovestone faction, the Communist Party (Opposition). By the time he translated *The Russian Revolution*, the Lovestone faction was on the verge of dissolution and he was living in Provincetown, Massachusetts, hanging out with writers associated with the anti-Stalinist *Partisan Review* crowd. Luxemburg's text appeared in May of 1940, as a fifty-six-page pamphlet issued by the Lovestoneite Workers Age Publishers.[15]

Wolfe's introduction to this edition not only heaps unreserved praise upon Luxemburg and the document but extols it as "an amazing example of the fruitfulness of the Marxist method at its best for the understanding of history in the making" (Wolfe, 1940: iv). He explains the circumstances surrounding the publication of the less complete version, the attacks leveled against it, how the German Social Democrats used it against the Communists and how the Communists dismissed it as misguided and error-filled. For Wolfe, it was a potential beacon for a very different path to socialism but instead "was made into a faction football and kicked around by everyone" (Wolfe, 1940: v). However, in his summary and assessment of the document, Wolfe points out Luxemburg's "mistakes" and, regarding her treatment of the agrarian and national questions, sides with Lenin. Overall, Wolfe comes across as an independent Marxist still committed to socialism.

Walter Rodney read Wolfe's translation, but he read it under the imprint of the University of Michigan Press. Published in 1961 with a new Introduction by Wolfe, the book now bore the title *The Russian Revolution, and Leninism*

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[15] On Bertram D. Wolfe, see Wolfe (1981); Treadgold (1979: 335-348); and on the Lovestoneites, see Alexander (1981); LeBlanc and Davenport (2015).

or Marxism? The title reflected the addition of a second document, her 1904 essay "Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy," which Wolfe changed to "Leninism or Marxism?" Wolfe had remade himself into an anti-Communist Cold War warrior and Luxemburg's texts were radically reframed as weapons in the Cold War. He preserved or paraphrased a few passages from his 1940 Introduction, eliminating any agreements with Lenin or his sharpest criticisms of Luxemburg's judgment. In fact, he frames his essay as a comparison with Lenin, the latter as the embodiment of totalitarianism and the former as the angel of democracy. He even stooped to deliberately misrepresenting their respective positions. On the war, for example, he paints a gendered portrait of her as a pacifist whose anti-war activism was motivated by the suffering of the working classes, and Lenin as aggressor bent on turning the imperialist war into a civil war! (Wolfe, 1961a: 10)[16] Wolfe went so far as to suggest that the newly formed German Communist Party had been "Russified" against Luxemburg's better wishes and better judgment, forcing her to assume leadership of a Party whose tactics she found disagreeable. Assuming a melodramatic tone, he writes: "In vain did she try to convince them that to oppose both the Councils and the Constituent Assembly with their tiny forces was madness and a breaking of their democratic faith. They voted to try to take power in the streets, that is by armed uprising. Almost alone in her party, Rosa Luxemburg decided with a heavy heart to lend her energy and her name to their effort" (Wolfe, 1961a: 16–17).

Little wonder why Walter Rodney approached the document with a fair share of suspicion.

WALTER RODNEY IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF RED ROSA

Walter Rodney returned home in 1974 to head the History Department at the University of Guyana. The appointment never materialized, however. President Forbes Burnham pressured the university Board of Governors to rescind the appointment. Burnham correctly perceived the brilliant, charismatic Rodney as a threat to his regime and believed that by denying him employment he would go away, perhaps back to Africa. He was mistaken.

Rodney had just devoted several years to reading, writing, thinking, and teaching about revolution and the challenges of socialist transformation while living in Tanzania, a declared socialist state. President Julius Nyerere deemed their brand of non-aligned African socialism "Ujamaa." The University of Dar es Salaam had been a hotbed of radical scholars in an era characterized by armed struggles for decolonization and socialist revolutions in the Third World. Tanzania served as the base for several anti-colonial and liberation movements in exile, and the competing models of Soviet and Chinese societies were common topics of discussion and debate. Though keenly aware of his status as a guest in Tanzania, Rodney was not afraid to criticize the government. He often supported student radicals on campus when they clashed with the government and helped launch the journal *Cheche*, Swahili for "Spark" or *Iskra* in Russian, named after the organ of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. *Cheche* was mildly critical of Ujamaa and the bourgeois character of university education (Shivji, 2012; Markle, 2017; Lewis, 1998: 124–153).

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[16] A version of the "Introduction" was reprinted in Wolfe (1961b).

Rodney spent a great deal of time analyzing peasants and the land question, a prominent issue, as we've already seen, in debates surrounding the Russian Revolution. For Rodney, the issue was unavoidable since this was the fundamental question for post-independence Africa, especially in Tanzania where Ujamaa entailed the creation of collective villages. In his studies of Russia, he wrestled with the question of collectivization. He wrote a provocative essay that argued that President Julius Nyerere's concept of Ujamaa was not "African socialism," as he described it, but an expression of scientific socialism. The parallel he drew with Russia was not of forced collectivization but a vision of direct peasant socialism promoted by the Narodniks in which the *mir* (village communes) and *artel* (artisans' cooperatives) might lay the foundations for socialism in the Third World—a position, incidentally, with which Luxemburg would have vehemently disagreed.[17] His point was that stages of development are not fixed; Africa, notably Tanzania, could leap over the capitalist stage and move directly to socialism through Ujamaa villages. He was not promoting some kind of atavistic form of communalism but rather collective ownership and production in the countryside that could benefit from the technological advances of industrial socialist and even capitalist countries (Rodney, 1972: 61–76).

Rodney came home armed with an impressive knowledge of the history of socialist revolutions and an even more impressive record of revolutionary praxis. He immediately threw himself into the work of organizing the newly formed Working People's Alliance. It was not a cadre organization but a mass-based multi-racial political movement that mobilized Afro- and Indo-Guyanese, as well as Indigenous groups. The two major parties in the country were divided largely along racial lines: Cheddi Jagan's People's

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[17] According to Norman Geras (1976: 85), since at least 1903 Luxemburg argued against the populist idea that the peasant commune can be the bases for building socialism. She held on to the stages of development, not dogmatically, but because Russia was already on a path to capitalist development.

Progressive Party (PPP) had a substantial Indian (South Asian) following, whereas Burnham's People's National Congress (PNC) was predominantly Black. But like Luxemburg's revolutionary Germany, Guyana's major parties identified as social democrats or socialists. Burnham proclaimed his country a "cooperative socialist republic" and enjoyed close ties with Havana and Moscow; Jagan, the country's first Chief Minister, was a Communist who also had some Soviet ties. In fact, the social democratic turn was a regional phenomenon, not limited to Guyana. During the 1970s, Eric Williams of Trinidad and Jamaica's Michael Manley had at least cast out in the direction of social democracy. Manley's efforts to build socialism through parliamentary measures and redistributive policies funded through deficit finance collapsed under the weight of mounting debt, internal violence, and IMF-imposed structural adjustment policies.

But just as Luxemburg had declared German Social Democracy a "stinking corpse" in 1915, exactly sixty years later in the pages of *The Black Scholar*, Rodney said much the same thing about the presumptive leaders of Caribbean social democracy. Rodney singled out Burnham and Manley as "pseudo-socialists" who promoted policies of nationalization, state repression, racial divisions, and "the deliberate distortion of revolutionary concepts" as means of consolidating power. "[N]eo-colonial politics," Rodney cautioned, "have entered a new operational phase in which pseudo-socialism is adjudged to be more effective than anti-socialism as a means of maintaining control over the working people . . . Pseudosocialism is especially concerned with its image at home and abroad and seeks support from the socialist camp and from revolutionary sectors of the imperialist world" (Rodney, 1975: 20).

Pseudosocialism had to be contested by the working classes, according to Rodney, and that meant building workers' democracy. In 1978, he published an editorial in the inaugural issue of *Transition*, a journal he and some of his WPA colleagues founded. Echoing Luxemburg's critique of the Bolsheviks, he argued that workers' democracy was an essential element, if not a precondition, in the struggle for socialism in the Third World. He criticized the undemocratic practices of Marxist regimes in Africa—notably, the People's Republic of the Congo (Brazzaville), Ethiopia, Somalia, and Guinea under Sekou Touré. In these states, he contended, "Marxist intellectuals have been silenced, workers' representatives have been eliminated and the working class as a whole excluded from democratic participation in social reconstruction. For transition to have validity, it must include the widespread promotion of socialist education without caricature and it must rely firmly on workers' democracy" (Rodney, 1978: 8; Lewis, 1998: 217). The voice of Luxemburg could not be any clearer.

One of the first serious challenges to Burnham's "pseudosocialism" came that same year. In July, the Burnham regime held a referendum to allow the government to change the Constitution with only a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, bypassing the referendum process. Some of the proposed changes would have limited certain civil liberties, such as freedom of speech and assembly, and given the PNC control over critical aspects of the electoral process rather than an independent Elections Commission. Mass protests convinced the people to boycott: between 10 and 15 percent of the electorate turned out. The defeat of the referendum only intensified Burnham's antipathy toward the WPA. And to complicate matters, the deepening political conflict coincided with the Jonestown massacre in which over 900 Americans died by mass suicide under orders of the Reverend Jim Jones, though the tragedy did nothing to dampen U.S. support for the Burnham regime (Lewis, 1998: 225–227; Gibbons, 2011: 188–189).

The WPA organ, *Dayclean*, declared 1979 "the year of the turn," by which they meant a turn "from dictatorship over the masses to democracy of the masses." That year witnessed revolutions in Nicaragua, Iran, and—most significantly for the people of Guyana—Grenada. The New Jewel Movement's (NJM) overthrow of Eric Gairy's regime on March 13, 1979, marked a sea-change, not only for the Left in the Caribbean but throughout the hemisphere and around the world. Two months later, a popular uprising in Dominica forced a regime change. St. Lucia followed with the election of the left-leaning Labor Party. And in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, three opposition parties formed an alliance to defeat the virulently anti-communist Milton Cato government (Roopnarine, 2010: 14–15; Gibbons, 2011: 196). Andaiye (2020), editor of *Dayclean* and a founding member of the WPA, vividly recalled how the Grenadian Revolution emboldened the movement in Guyana to take on the Burnham regime, but much of the Guyanese left was reluctant since Burnham still controlled the military.

Then, on July 11, 1979, the Office of the General Secretary, People's National Congress and Ministry of National Development was burned to the ground. Several WPA members and associates were arrested, including Rodney, Rupert Roopnarine (filmmaker, poet, writer), Bonita Harris, Kwame Apata, Omawale, and Karen De Souza. A week later, a mass rally in Georgetown drew some 5,000 in defense of the arrested WPA leaders, all of whom had been released on bond. Rodney spoke last and electrified the crowd by calling for the overthrow of Burnham "by any means necessary" (Lewis, 1998: 229; Kwayana , 2008). On July 27, the WPA officially constituted itself as a political party under a program called "Towards a Revolutionary Socialist Guyana." Rodney backed the decision to create a disciplined cadre organization so long as it maintained a broad democratic character as opposed to a vanguard party.

Rodney's opposition to vanguardism may seem counterintuitive given his defense of Lenin over Luxemburg, but events in Grenada had exposed its limitations. Rodney was especially critical of Maurice Bishop, leader of the NJM, because he dismissed press freedoms and "notions of parliament" as "bourgeois rights." Rodney vehemently disagreed. According to Andaiye, "His point was that the rights that left-wing Caribbean people referred to, dismissively, as 'bourgeois-democratic rights' were rights which, in the Caribbean at least, had been fought for and won by working people" (Lewis, 1998: 225, 232). Bishop did not take kindly to Rodney's criticisms, once referring to him as "a pain in the ass!" Andaiye, too, pointed to the decline of mass organizations in Grenada under Bishop, which she attributed in part to the anti-democratic character of the Marxist–Leninist cadre party. As early as 1982, elements of the Caribbean Left had begun to quietly break with Bishop over the lack of democracy in Grenada. Seeing the writing on the wall, as it were, the WPA abandoned its plans to become a cadre organization and opted instead to remain a mass party with a robust electoral strategy (Andaiye, 2020).

The fact that Forbes Burnham *supported* Bishop and the NJM and even provided their cadre members with military training may have put the WPA in an awkward position, but they never wavered in their support for the Grenadian Revolution—at least not publicly. Few on the Left had Rodney's or Andaiye's temerity to criticize the revolution openly, much to the movement's detriment. In his assessment of the overthrow and subsequent collapse of the NJM in 1983, Clive Thomas, one of Rodney's closest comrades, argued that failing to hold free and fair elections eroded popular support. But he also laid part of the blame on the Caribbean Left, including the WPA, for withholding public criticism for fear of splitting ranks, undermining the revolution, and opening the door for a U.S. invasion. Their silence did not stop the invasion, and the NJM was not held to account by its comrades (Thomas, 1984: 7, 23; Meeks, 1993).

In many ways, the PNC resembled the SPD after the German Revolution, in that Burnham's ties with Havana, Moscow, and the NJM in Grenada provided left-wing cover for his authoritarian regime. It also allowed Burnham to paint the WPA as "ultra-Leftists" much as the SPD treated the Spartacists. Again, here was Rodney's Luxemburgian moment: the WPA's independent analysis of the class forces and material conditions in the region exposing the "pseudo-socialist" leadership of Manley and Burnham led to its isolation and vilification by the Soviet-oriented left. Even Cheddi Jagan of the PPP regarded the WPA as "adventurists" (Lewis, 1998: 215–223). So as the "year of the turn" evolved into the year of rebellion and repression, WPA leaders had targets on their backs and few international allies. The established world Communist powers—the USSR, China, and Cuba—refused to come to their defense since Burnham was their man. And the PPP made the fateful decision to abandon its opposition to the PNC and instead offer the ruling party "critical support," especially for policies consistent with their Marxist and anti-imperialist agenda (Lewis, 1998: 212–213). To the WPA leadership, Burnham issued a chilling warning: "Prepare your wills" (Gibbon, 2011: 196).

And so it began. In July, Father Bernard Darke, a Jesuit priest and journalist critical of Burnham, was stabbed to death by members of the pro-PNC gang, the House of Israel, as he took photos of demonstrators protesting the arrests of Rodney and other WPA members for arson. Throughout the summer and fall, the police arrested, beat, and shot dozens of WPA activists, the most prominent casualties being Ohene Koama and Edward Dublin. Strikes erupted across the country involving some 20,000 workers, primarily in the bauxite and sugar industries. Rodney and Clive Thomas had begun to hold political education workshops with bauxite workers, for which they were arrested several times. Rodney's home was also ransacked by police, who seized valuable papers and books (Gibbons, 2011: 195–205; Kwayana, 2008; *Black Scholar*, 1979).[18]

Eusi Kwayana identified the insurgency as the "civil rebellion." In 1979, the civil rebellion peaked near the end of the summer, early fall, but then lost momentum—partly as a result of growing state repression. While few, if any, WPA leaders believed the overthrow of Burnham was imminent, they did not rule it out. The spontaneity of the rebellion even caught veteran organizers, such as Eusi Kwayana, by surprise. Rupert Roopnarine recalls "attempting to equip ourselves, essentially ready ourselves, and ready the masses for an insurrectionary attack on the state. . . . It's no secret we were accumulating weapons. We were accumulating equipment of various kinds, and a certain amount of that was coming from the military" (quoted in Chung, 2012). Rodney had delivered a powerful speech, "People's Power, No Dictator" which the WPA turned into a pamphlet and issued in October of 1979. He exposed Burnham's "cooperative republic" as a brutal dictatorship in socialist clothes, absent any credibility or legitimacy. He charged the regime with abrogating all of the basic rights for which generations of Guyanese working people fought and called for non-cooperation and civil disobedience, national unity, and popular resistance on every front. The text could have served as the needed spark to expand the civil rebellion since "People's Power, No Dictator" had become a popular slogan, but the WPA only had funds to print about 2,000 copies, and by fall the insurgency began to dwindle.[19]

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[18] For an excellent overview of the repression and civil rebellion in 1979-1980, see Canterbury (2005).

[19] The pamphlet has been reprinted numerous times. See, for example, Walter Rodney (1981). This version includes a fine introduction by Trevor Campbell.

Similar to Luxemburg, Rodney blamed leadership for the lull in popular activity. In a letter dated May 2, 1980, he wrote, "the leadership—whether of the other left political party, the progressive trade unions or of the other anti-dictatorial parties and groups—did not see the possibilities that were present in the simultaneous explosion of mass militancy and worker action; they were in fact, overwhelmed by their sense that in the face of all this, the power of the state nevertheless remained intact" (Lewis, 1998: 239). But he also conceded that the state was weakening, evidenced by Burnham's desperate efforts to reorganize the armed services and police, firing civil servants, resulting in the creation of private armies in the face of uncertainty. Even during the lull, state repression intensified. In the two weeks leading up to Rodney's assassination in June 1980, at least thirty-nine people were arrested for "suspicion of political action" and some thirty homes searched (Lewis, 1998: 240).

Rodney knew he was a marked man. Many of his comrades had already died at the hands of the state. Rupert Roopnarine barely survived an assassination attempt, and Clive Thomas had escaped a kidnapping. The Guyana Police Force had its own steel band that performed an original piece titled "Run, Rodney, Run," and posters bearing the same title appeared throughout Georgetown (Gibbons, 2011: 207). On June 13, he was blown up by a bomb hidden in a walkie-talkie. As with Luxemburg, the government and press reports blamed Rodney for his own demise. The official government line was that Rodney was planning to blow up the prison but the explosive device detonated prematurely. The day after his death, unsigned leaflets circulated in Georgetown declaring, "He who lives by the bomb shall die by the bomb. Rodney blows himself up on the way to blow up prison. WPA don't look for scapegoats now" (Lewis, 1998: 245).

TAKING POWER IS NO TEA PARTY

C.L.R. James, the renowned Trinidadian Marxist, cultural critic, and former mentor to Rodney, gave a lecture at UCLA just months after Rodney was assassinated in Guyana. Titled "Walter Rodney and the Question of Power," it was supposed to be James's sober assessment of the reasons for his premature death. For James it was a political question: "Walter had not studied the taking of power." And to whom does he turn to make his case? Lenin and the Russian Revolution, primarily his speeches and writings following the 1905 Revolution on the eve of the October Revolution. It is odd to read given what I know about Rodney's deep and thorough reading of the history of the Russian Revolution. Perhaps James was unaware? Or perhaps he knew all too well? But one of the striking points he makes, drawing on Lenin, is that insurrection is not a conspiracy and it depends not on a party but on "an advanced class," which is to say, a popular insurgency of a politically conscious people. And most importantly, that advanced class must be in conflict with the ruler. In Guyana, James asserted, this was not the case since Forbes Burnham continued to enjoy broad support. He goes on to explain why and how Burnham was able to maneuver as a faux socialist and Cheddi Jagan, with all of his Soviet credentials, was in retreat. As James put it, "[Walter] did not wait for the revolutionary people and the revolutionary class to be in conflict with the government before he could start the question of the insurrection" (James, 1982).[20]

Clearly, James was wrong. Rodney understood that taking power was not on the horizon and he knew fully well how Burnham was able to maneuver behind the cover of what had begun to appear as a dying old Left. But an insurrection did occur, however fleeting, uneven, and unsustainable. In fact, Rodney knew something Maurice Bishop apparently did not: that the masses are the driver of revolution, not the party, and their energies require the oxygen of radical democracy.

Even in defeat, he learned, as Rosa Luxemburg had learned generations earlier, that authoritarian rule rests on a shaky foundation and people's power will prevail. Rosa Luxemburg's final printed words before her death vowed that:

> [A] future victory will blossom from this "defeat." "Order rules in Berlin." You stupid lackeys! Your "order" is built on sand. Tomorrow the revolution will rear ahead once more and announce to your horror amid the brass of trumpets: "I was, I am, I always will be!" (Quoted in Nettl, 2019 [1966]: 772)

Rodney learned a great deal in the struggle for Guyana, and much of what he learned brought him closer to Luxemburg than perhaps he realized. Eusi Kwayana's observations about Rodney's views on spontaneity and self-emancipation are instructive here:

> His views on spontaneity were related to his views on the self-emancipation of the working people. He saw the role of the revolutionary party, armed with a body of scientific political culture, as crucial. Scientific theory has its necessary relevance. Its role is to organize the experience of the working people worldwide and to compare it with a particular experience which is then enriched. Theory imparts awareness and enlarges the vision but revolutionary energy comes from the bowels of the oppressed and is an indispensable element of people's struggle.

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[20] The essay first appeared in Edward A. Alpers and Pierre-Michel Fontaine (1982).

> Self-emancipation, then, does not mean the separation of theory from the masses of working people but the union of theory with the revolutionary instincts and experience of working people and with the revolutionary party so organized and so rooted that it is willing to take instructions from the working people's representatives. Negative vanguardism, then, is not the quality of a revolutionary party working from its base within the working people but a body giving orders to the working people and ignoring their best instincts as ill-informed or superstitious (Kwayana, 2008; James, 2017).

The final point I wish to make here is that James's critique of Rodney is eerily similar to Rodney's critique of Luxemburg. James virtually repeats Rodney's charge against Luxemburg: his failed analysis led to his death. In both instances, the fatal outcomes were interpreted by both men as the consequence of tactical missteps arising from errors in revolutionary judgment, not as casualties of a messy and asymmetric class war. Perhaps their cold political calculus masked a kind of survivor's guilt in the face of revolutionaries willing to pay the ultimate price for their commitment? Rodney's praxis in Guyana helped him see and embrace Rosa's understanding of democracy as praxis, and I suspect the later Rodney would have toned down his criticisms of Luxemburg—especially the line blaming her for her own murder. James, on the other hand, had come around to Rosa's position on democracy as praxis before Rodney was born. In the history of the Communist International published in 1937, James wrote of Luxemburg, "time has proved that her views foresaw only too well the dangers of excessive centralism and the glorification of the idea of dictatorship" (James, 2017: 136–137). Had Luxemburg and Liebknecht lived, he conjectured, "they and they alone could have prevented the corruption from Moscow of the German party leadership which began during Lenin's last illness and ended in the ruin of 1933." And yet he, too, attributed her violent and untimely death to her own tactical blunders, calling their decision to remain in Berlin after the state crushed the German Revolution "the greatest mistake of all" (James, 2017: 141–142).

While James's posthumous criticisms of Rodney, like Rodney's critique of Luxemburg, were misguided to say the least, studied together they do pose a larger question. Did we err in releasing Rodney's unfinished manuscript? Given his experiences with the WPA and the evolution of his thinking, would he still have wanted to publish the lectures in their original state? Will we witness similar tribunals surrounding this text on how "wrong" or "correct" he was on this or that matter? Will it be used as a defense of Stalinism? Will those of us who revere the martyred Walter Rodney have the temerity to read the book critically, situating it within its historical and political context? And will we recognize how far Rodney moved from those heady days in Dar es Salaam when the defeat of capitalism seemed imminent, to his final years in

Guyana when he and his comrades creatively mobilized the masses against a repressive regime calling itself socialist?

In life and death, Rosa Luxemburg and Walter Rodney were kindred spirits. Their work was always unfinished, always in motion, always an expression of the collective desire for freedom, and always a project of creolization. Neither separated their writing from praxis, which is why Luxemburg ended her life practicing the principles behind her critique of the Bolsheviks. The struggle to build proletarian democracy imbued with the energies of the people transformed her perspective on the revolution and informed her critique of Lenin's centralism. Similarly, Rodney proved to be a "better intellectual heir" to Luxemburg than he even realized because even when he sought to understand and even justify Soviet policies, his own political practice centered on building people's democracy. He knew that "laws of development" were not fixed or even "laws" in the formal sense, and that real movements were guided by more than theory but improvisation, imagination, will, an ethical commitment to the oppressed, and a willingness to die in struggle so that others might one day live free.

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