

Book Review

## **Rosa Luxemburg: Ideas in Action**

by Paul Frölich, translated by Johanna Hoornweg. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2010. \$18 U.S., paper. ISBN 97-1-60846-074-8. Pages: 1-311.

*Reviewed by Tiffany Hall<sup>1</sup>*

*Rosa Luxemburg: Ideas in Action* is the intellectual biography of Rosa Luxemburg and her role in socialist party movements in Poland, Russia, and Germany at the turn of the 20th century. Author Paul Frölich sketches a portrait of a woman who greatly shaped the composition and direction of socialist ideology. The author was himself once a member of the German Socialist Democratic Party and, like Luxemburg, was a founding member of the German Communist Party. These positions allowed for an intimate relationship with Luxemburg, giving him access to her incredible character before she died. Frölich combines what few writings of Luxemburg still exist with other personal and political writings from other party members during that time. By doing so, he constructs a vivid account of Luxemburg's progression through the socialist party system up until her murder in January of 1919.

While reading Frölich's book it becomes questionable whether he should have created two separate pieces instead of one: only chapters one and ten speak specifically to Luxemburg's personality and life in a biographical manner. The other chapters, which make up a substantial part of the book, alternatively may have been presented as a history of the socialist party. Several chapters are more focused on the relationships between Luxemburg, Kautsky, Mehring, and Liebknecht, party members and writers who worked closely with Luxemburg and held key positions in the party, and many chapters describe the intricate details large events, such as the Russian Revolution and the First World War. Yet there are few mentions of Clara Zetkin, who was known to be Luxemburg's most intimate friend. Frölich's decision to create the book as it appears is a testament to the dedication of Luxemburg to the socialist cause; separating the two would be disingenuous. Thus, those looking specifically for information on Luxemburg the individual may be slightly disappointed; her life was too much a part of politics to ignore

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any of her political endeavors in attempting to understand the person she was. For this reason, the book is a much more substantial contribution to understanding the creation and progression of the socialist party.

Due to her role in the changing nature of the party, Luxemburg could not help but have a heavy presence in the discussion of party politics. Frölich's strongest aspect is his detailing of the progression of socialist ideas and movement during the most intense times. For instance, the chapter on the outbreak of the First World War is a substantial contribution to the understanding of the socialist position in Germany and Prussia at the time. Frölich integrates aspects from Luxemburg's writing for pamphlets and articles to highlight the parallels and progression of her ideology. His discussion of her piece *The Accumulation of Capital* reveals Luxemburg's process in her own understanding of Marxism. He describes the effect it had on understanding imperialism and capitalism and how it changed the approach of the party toward policies for the working class.

Although the entirety of the book is informative and succinct, the real beauty of Frölich's writing as an author comes to fruition during the last two chapters of the book; the final two months of the German revolution leading up to Luxemburg's murder. Frölich describes the creation of the "Spartakusbund" and provides many excerpts from the *Rote Fahne*, the journal in which Luxemburg would write for the final time. Frölich points to this time period as the clearest indication of a direct extension of Karl Marx's ideas, particularly the *Communist Manifesto*. This adds greater emphasis on the importance of Luxemburg and her socialist advocacy within historical Marxism.

In final chapter, Frölich reveals the little known facts about Luxemburg's life and character, as well as provides his own opinion on the events leading to her death. The strength of the counter-revolution is seen by Frölich as a 'diabolical plan' in which Luxemburg and her Spartans were deliberately dismantled through political guises. Frölich's witness of the decline in mental health following her weakening physical state provides enough speculation for him to ask whether Luxemburg was the great leader they believed her to be:

"...did her physical strength simply not suffice for the necessary tasks, or did this great leader, who as a theoretician and as a strategist of class struggle moved ahead with such unshakeable inner strength and tenacity, lack that crowning touch of the party leader who can make realistically sound judgments at critical moments irrespective of his mood

and who knows how to see to it that his decisions are carried out - that crowning touch which became Lenin's second nature. This question, of course, can never be answered" (p.293).

Frölich's question is somewhat sorrowful, as he acknowledges that the events led to the rise of the counter-revolution, and to the eventual rise to power of Hitler in 1933.

Overall, Frölich's piece allows for an extensive yet clear description of the creation of the socialist party in Prussia, Russia, and Germany at the turn of the 20th century. This newly translated edition provides greater detail of Luxemburg's life as well as excerpts from her most influential writings, particularly those that had great impact on the socialist party. Frölich's book provides a significant contribution to understanding the progression of the socialist party and, more importantly, to understanding the role Luxemburg had in advocating for socialism and the power of the working class. Frölich's book is an important historical contribution to Marxist literature and an important tool for understanding past socialist ideologies and the current political landscape.