

Rosa Luxemburg: Excerpts from "The War and the Workers" - *The Junius Pamphlet*, 1916

The voting of war credits in August 1914 was a shattering moment in the life of individual socialists and of the socialist movement in Europe. Those who had worked for and wholly believed in the ability of organized labor to stand against war now saw the major social democratic parties of Germany, France, and England rush to the defense of their fatherlands. Worker solidarity had proved an impotent myth. Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) had for years warned against the stultifying effects of the overly bureaucratized German Social Democratic Party and the anti-revolutionary tendencies of the trade unions that played such a large role in the party's policy decisions ... While she was able to construct new hope from the revolutionary opportunities presented by the war, Luxemburg could not shake the knowledge that, whatever the outcome, the European working class would pay the greatest price in blood and suffering. Thrice handicapped--a woman, a Pole, and a Jew--Luxemburg was the most eloquent voice of the left wing of German Social Democracy, the defender of Marxist purity against all comers, and a constant advocate of radical action. She spent much of the war in jail, where she wrote and then smuggled out the pamphlet excerpted below. Published under the name "Junius," perhaps a reference to Lucius Junius Brutus, a legendary republican hero of ancient Rome, the pamphlet became the guiding statement for the International Group, which became the Spartacus League and ultimately the Communist Party of Germany (January 1, 1919).

Chapter 1

The scene has changed fundamentally. The six weeks' march to Paris has grown into a world drama. Mass slaughter has become the tiresome and monotonous business of the day and the end is no closer. Bourgeois statecraft is held fast in its own vise. The spirits summoned up can no longer be exorcised.

Gone is the euphoria. Gone the patriotic noise in the streets, the chase after the gold-colored automobile, one false telegram after another, the wells poisoned by cholera, the Russian students heaving bombs over every railway bridge in Berlin, the French airplanes over Nuremberg, the spy hunting public running amok in the streets, the swaying crowds in the coffee shops with ear-deafening patriotic songs surging ever higher, whole city neighborhoods transformed into mobs ready to denounce, to mistreat women, to shout hurrah and to induce delirium in themselves by means of wild rumors. ...

The spectacle is over ... The trains full of reservists are no longer accompanied by virgins fainting from pure jubilation. They no longer greet the people from the windows of the train with joyous smiles. Carrying their packs, they quietly trot along the streets where the public goes about its daily business with aggrieved visages.

In the prosaic atmosphere of pale day there sounds a different chorus--the hoarse cries of the vulture and the hyenas of the battlefield. "Ten thousand tarpaulins guaranteed up to regulations!" "A hundred thousand kilos of bacon, cocoa powder, coffee-substitute --c.o.d, immediate delivery!" "Hand grenades, lathes, cartridge pouches, marriage bureaus for widows of the fallen, leather belts, jobbers for war orders--serious offers

only!" The cannon fodder loaded onto trains in August and September is moldering in the killing fields of Belgium, the Vosges, and Masurian Lakes where the profits are springing up like weeds. It's a question of getting the harvest into the barn quickly. Across the ocean stretch thousands of greedy hands to snatch it up.

Business thrives in the ruins. Cities become piles of ruins; villages become cemeteries; countries, deserts; populations are beggared; churches, horse stalls. International law, treaties and alliances, the most sacred words and the highest authority have been torn in shreds. Every sovereign "by the grace of God" is called a rogue and lying scoundrel by his cousin on the other side. Every diplomat is a cunning rascal to his colleagues in the other party. Every government sees every other as dooming its own people and worthy only of universal contempt. There are food riots in Venice, in Lisbon, Moscow, Singapore. There is plague in Russia, and misery and despair everywhere.

Violated, dishonored, wading in blood, dripping filth--there stands bourgeois society. This is it [in reality]. Not all spic and span and moral, with pretense to culture, philosophy, ethics, order, peace, and the rule of law--but the ravening beast, the witches' sabbath of anarchy, a plague to culture and humanity. Thus it reveals itself in its true, its naked form.

In the midst of this witches' sabbath a catastrophe of world-historical proportions has happened: International Social Democracy has capitulated. To deceive ourselves about it, to cover it up, would be the most foolish, the most fatal thing the proletariat could do. ... The fall of the socialist proletariat in the present world war is unprecedented. It is a misfortune for humanity. But socialism will be lost only if the international proletariat fails to measure the depth of this fall, if it refuses to learn from it.

The last forty-five year period in the development of the modern labor movement now stands in doubt. What we are experiencing in this critique is a closing of accounts for what will soon be half a century of work at our posts. The grave of the Paris Commune ended the first phase of the European labor movement as well as the First International. Since then there began a new phase. In place of spontaneous revolutions, risings, and barricades, after which the proletariat each time fell back into passivity, there began the systematic daily struggle, the exploitation of bourgeois parliamentarianism, mass organizations, the marriage of the economic with the political struggle, and that of socialist ideals with stubborn defense of immediate daily interests. For the first time the polestar of strict scientific teachings lit the way for the proletariat and for its emancipation. Instead of sects, schools, utopias, and isolated experiments in various countries, there arose a uniform, international theoretical basis which bound countries together like the strands of a rope. Marxist knowledge gave the working class of the entire world a compass by which it can make sense of the welter of daily events and by which it can always plot the right course to take to the fixed and final goal.

She who bore, championed, and protected this new method was German Social Democracy. The [Franco-Prussian] War and the defeat of the Paris Commune had shifted the center of gravity for the European workers' movement to Germany. As France was the classic site of the first phase of proletarian class struggle and Paris the beating, bleeding heart of the European laboring classes of those times, so the German workers became the vanguard of the second phase. By means of countless sacrifices and tireless attention to

detail, they have built the strongest organization, the one most worthy of emulation; they created the biggest press, called the most effective means of education and enlightenment into being, gathered the most powerful masses of voters and attained the greatest number of parliamentary mandates. German Social Democracy was considered the purest embodiment of Marxist socialism. She had and laid claim to a special place in the Second International--its instructress and leader.

... Especially in the questions of the struggle against militarism and war, German Social Democracy always took the lead. "For us Germans that is unacceptable" regularly sufficed to decide the orientation of the Second International, which blindly bestowed its confidence upon the admired leadership of the mighty German Social Democracy: the pride of every socialist and the terror of the ruling classes everywhere.

And what did we in Germany experience when the great historical test came? The most precipitous fall, the most violent collapse. Nowhere has the organization of the proletariat been yoked so completely to the service of imperialism. Nowhere is the state of siege borne so docilely. Nowhere is the press so hobbled, public opinion so stifled, the economic and political class struggle of the working class so totally surrendered as in Germany.

But German Social Democracy was not merely the strongest vanguard troop, it was the thinking head of the International. For this reason, we must begin the analysis, the self-examination process, with its fall. ... The working class can boldly look truth straight in the face, even the bitterest self-renunciation, for its weaknesses are only confusion. The strict law of history gives back its power, stands guarantee for its final victory.

...

One thing is certain. The world war is a turning point. It is foolish and mad to imagine that we need only survive the war, like a rabbit waiting out the storm under a bush, in order to fall happily back into the old routine once it is over. The world war has altered the conditions of our struggle and, most of all, it has changed us ... The tempo of development has received a mighty jolt from the eruption of the volcano of imperialism. The violence of the conflicts in the bosom of society, the enormosity of the tasks that tower up before the socialist proletariat--these make everything that has transpired in the history of the workers' movement seem a pleasant idyll.

Historically, this war was ordained to thrust forward the cause of the proletariat....It was ordained to drive the German proletariat to the pinnacle of the nation and thereby begin to organize the international and universal conflict between capital and labor for political power within the state ...

Men do not make history according to their own free will. But they make history nonetheless ... The victory of socialism will not descend from heaven. It can only be won by a long chain of violent tests of strength between the old and the new powers. The international proletariat under the leadership of the Social Democrats will thereby learn to try to take its history into its own hands; instead of remaining a will-less football, it will take the tiller of social life and become the pilot to the goal of its own history.

Friedrich Engels once said: "Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism." What does "regression into barbarism" mean to our lofty European civilization? Until now, we have all probably read and repeated these words thoughtlessly, without suspecting their fearsome seriousness. A look around us at this moment shows what the regression of bourgeois society into barbarism means. This world war is a regression into barbarism. The triumph of imperialism leads to the annihilation of civilization ... Today, we face the choice exactly as Friedrich Engels foresaw it a generation ago: either the triumph of imperialism and the collapse of all civilization as in ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration--a great cemetery. Or the victory of socialism, that means the conscious active struggle of the international proletariat against imperialism and its method of war. This is a dilemma of world history, an either/or; the scales are wavering before the decision of the class-conscious proletariat. The future of civilization and humanity depends on whether or not the proletariat resolves manfully to throw its revolutionary broadsword into the scales. In this war imperialism has won. Its bloody sword of genocide has brutally tilted the scale toward the abyss of misery. The only compensation for all the misery and all the shame would be if we learn from the war how the proletariat can seize mastery of its own destiny and escape the role of the lackey to the ruling classes ...

Now, millions of proletarians of all tongues fall upon the field of dishonor, of fratricide, lacerating themselves while the song of the slave is on their lips ... We are like the Jews that Moses led through the desert. But we are not lost, and we will be victorious ...

Chapter 8

... Imperialism and all its political brutality, the chain of incessant social catastrophes that it has let loose, is undoubtedly an historical necessity for the ruling classes of the contemporary capitalist world. Nothing would be more fatal for the proletariat than to delude itself into believing that it were possible after this war to rescue the idyllic and peaceful continuation of capitalism. However, the conclusion to be drawn by proletarian policy from the historical necessity of imperialism is that surrender to imperialism will mean living forever in its victorious shadow and eating from its leftovers.

... Bourgeois class domination is undoubtedly an historical necessity, but, so too, the rising of the working class against it. Capital is an historical necessity, but, so too, its grave digger, the socialist proletariat. Imperialist world domination is an historical necessity, but, so too, its destruction by the proletarian international ...

...

The world war is a turning point. For the first time, the ravening beasts set loose upon all quarters of the globe by capitalist Europe have broken into Europe itself. A cry of horror went through the world when Belgium, that precious jewel of European civilization, and when the most august cultural monuments of northern France fell into shards under the impact of the blind forces of destruction. This same "civilized world" looked on passively as the same imperialism ordained the cruel destruction of ten thousand Herero tribesmen and filled the sands of the Kalahari with the mad shrieks and death rattles of men dying of thirst; [the "civilized world" looked on] as forty thousand men on the Putumayo River [Columbia] were tortured

to death within ten years by a band of European captains of industry, while the rest of the people were made into cripples; as in China where an age-old culture was put to the torch by European mercenaries, practiced in all forms of cruelty, annihilation, and anarchy; as Persia was strangled, powerless to resist the tightening noose of foreign domination; as in Tripoli where fire and sword bowed the Arabs beneath the yoke of capitalism, destroyed their culture and habitations. Only today has this "civilized world" become aware that the bite of the imperialist beast brings death, that its very breath is infamy. Only now has [the civilized world] recognized this, after the beast's ripping talons have clawed its own mother's lap, the bourgeois civilization of Europe itself ...

None the less, the imperialist bestiality raging in Europe's fields has one effect about which the "civilized world" is not horrified and for which it has no breaking heart: that is the mass destruction of the European proletariat ... Millions of human lives have been destroyed ... Millions have been crippled. But of these millions, nine out of ten are working people from the city and the countryside.

It is our strength, our hope, that is mown down day after day like grass under the sickle. The best, most intelligent, most educated forces of international socialism, the vanguard of the entire world proletariat, the workers of England, France, Belgium, Germany, Russia--these are the ones now being hamstrung and led to the slaughter. These workers of the leading capitalist countries of Europe are exactly the ones who have the historical mission of carrying out the socialist transformation. Only from out of Europe, only from out of the oldest capitalist countries will the signal be given when the hour is ripe for the liberating social revolution ...

What is now occurring is an unprecedented mass slaughter that is reducing the adult working population of all the leading civilized countries to women, old people, and cripples. This blood-letting threatens to bleed the European workers' movement to death ... This is an assault, not on the bourgeois culture of the past, but on the socialist culture of the future, a lethal blow against that force which carries the future of humanity within itself and which alone can bear the precious treasures of the past into a better society. Here capitalism lays bear its death's head; here it betrays the fact that its historical rationale is used up; its continued domination is no longer reconcilable to the progress of humanity ...

The madness will cease and the bloody demons of hell will vanish only when workers in Germany and France, England and Russia finally awake from their stupor, extend to each other a brotherly hand, and drown out the bestial chorus of imperialist war-mongers and the shrill cry of capitalist hyenas with labor's old and mighty battle cry: Proletarians of all lands, unite!

Source: Günter Radczun (ed.), "Die Krise der Sozialdemokratie (Junius-Broschüre)," in Rosa Luxemburg, Politische Schriften (Leipzig, 1970), pp. 229-43, 357-72. Translated by Richard S. Levy.]