

Words of Memory

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“Words of Memory”

“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.”

Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919)

On 15 January 1919, in the midst of the turbulence caused by the end of WWI and the German revolution, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, two leaders of the communist *Spartakusbund*, were arrested in Berlin by members of an ultranationalist *Freikorps*. In a car Rosa Luxemburg was shot in the head. Her body was thrown in the *Landwehrkanal*, to be found only months later. Hannah Arendt called Luxemburg's murder “the watershed between two eras in Germany”.¹ In 1899 Rosa Luxemburg had made a name for herself with her essay *Reform or Revolution*. Luxemburg argued against the evermore dominant view in the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* that capitalism would not bring forth its final crisis and that social equality and workers' rights could be realized through reforms from within the parliamentary system. Luxemburg did not agree and took a stand in favour of revolution. In her view, however, a socialist revolution should be a people's affair, a movement from below, and, importantly, the revolution should be emancipatory, enhancing fundamental human freedoms.

During WWI, Rosa Luxemburg spent a couple of years in prison because of her resistance against the war. While in prison, she forcefully repeated her views on revolution and freedom in an essay on the Russian revolution of 1917. In this essay, which can be considered her political testament, Luxemburg goes to the heart of one of the quintessential problems of modernity. In modern times, humans take it upon themselves to create – in their own, secular terms – the good society. This is, of course, a very tall order. It appeals to the utmost of humans' capacities. It is

also, as the 20th century showed in the most brutal and appalling manner, an endeavour plagued by great dangers. At the eve of the era in which totalitarian regimes would turn to ruthless terror and genocide to enforce their ideological fictions, Rosa Luxembourg seems to have intuited these dangers while she was writing about the early days of the revolution in Russia.

While Rosa Luxemburg remained committed to replace bourgeois democracy with a more equal socialist democracy, she persisted in her passionate attachment to freedom. Although she did not resolve all tensions between the revolutionary pursuit to socialize private property and the upholding of public freedoms, she did intuit what would happen if freedom became subordinate to attempts to realise political ideas in an authoritarian or even totalitarian manner. Luxemburg sensed that human life and social reality are too complex and unruly to subject them to simple ideological models, and that any effort which ignores this complexity and unruliness would only bring forth more violence. From her prison cell, Rosa Luxemburg wrote a poignant warning cry at a time when the totalitarian monster of fire and blood was raising its head in Europe. In words that link her thinking intimately to that of Hannah Arendt, Luxemburg wrote:

“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 (...).” ■

Maarten Van Alstein

◆ The “Words of Memory” section invites us to reflect on the most painful aspects of history, on memory, but also on witnessing, through selected quotations from famous writers and thinkers, some of them lesser known, others not. It proposes to clear a path for thought that goes against the grain of received ideas, as far from easy optimism as from demobilising pessimism.



(1) Arendt, Hannah, *Men in Dark Times*, San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970, p. 36; see also Hermsen, Joke J., *Het tij keren met Rosa Luxemburg en Hannah Arendt*, Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2019, p. 54-62. Quotes from Rosa Luxemburg from *Reform or Revolution and other writing*, New York: Dover, 2006, p. 215-216.