

Another View of Things: Rosa Luxemburg (1913)

Abstract

In this speech delivered in Leipzig, Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) speaks of the consequences of European imperialism not only for the working class of Europe but also for the oppressed peoples of the colonies. She also criticizes the Social Democratic Party (SPD) for tacitly supporting the government's military expansion. A year later, Luxemburg was jailed for speaking out against conscription.

Source

We live in a curious age, one in which a very specific aspect of public life is increasingly claiming the attention of the working class: the field of foreign policy. In the opinion of the average member of the petty bourgeoisie, and in keeping with his intellectual horizons, foreign policy refers to that section of the morning paper that he reads over his morning coffee to distract himself from his cares or from the nagging of his better half. For the working class, though, foreign policy is a deadly serious and extremely important matter. This has not always been the case. If we examine the intellectual life of the working class over the past few decades, if we take the pulse of this intellectual life, we can observe how the working class's interest in foreign policy has increased year by year. Yet it has not gone far enough: it must reach the point where every worker understands that he or she must follow the events of world politics with the same energy, attention, and passion reserved for domestic issues. Every proletarian man and woman must today say to him- or herself: everything that happens in foreign policy affects the proletariat's interests. If Negroes are suppressed by the German army in Africa, if Serbs and Bulgarians murder Turkish soldiers and peasants in the Balkans, if the conservative party suddenly gains the upper hand in Canadian elections, dismantling the liberal government, workers must understand that this is their business and that their interests are at stake. It was Karl Marx who provided us with a way to grasp this phenomenon many decades before developments had taken on such clear contours. In his famous inaugural address, he said, among other things, that struggles over foreign policy represented a part of the general struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat and were therefore part of the class struggle.

When we compare the current state of world politics with the period in which Marx delivered his inaugural speech, we can gauge how times have changed. In the 1860s, the focal point of world politics was the after-pains and consequences of the division of Poland at the hands of Prussia, Austria, and Russia. World politics centered on the friction between the countries that took part in this theft. If a person were to ask today, "What is the focus of international political events?," he would cause even a serious politician to get flustered. Today, we have a similar focus in the North Sea, in the rivalry between Germany and England. There is an entire cluster of conflicts and antagonisms in the Mediterranean. Peace in the Balkans has entailed dismembering European Turkey and has simultaneously laid the groundwork for the next war for Asian Turkey. But the international conflicts do not end here. Russia and England are fighting their battle at the expense of an unhappy Persia. A land and a people are being carved up in a time of peace. Farther east lies the formidable epicenter of the revolution in China. From Asia, our path takes us across the Pacific Ocean to America, which has been the source of constant surprises over the last few decades. American capitalists have been eyeing Asia greedily ever since the United States fought its first colonial war with Spain over the Philippines in 1898. This has led to a conflict between Japan, the United States, and England.

A closer examination of the wars waged over the last ten to fifteen years also reveals how political horizons have gradually broadened. Roughly speaking, the upheaval began with the Sino-Japanese wars

of 1895. Here, a country awoke to independence for the first time. There followed the war between Spain and America, which was the first time the United States had fought outside its territory. The Boer War of 1899 crowned a series of less conspicuous English conquests in the region. Then came the Huns' campaign in China and Wilhelm II's parting advice to his soldiers: grant no quarter and take no prisoners. German soldiers were to rage like the Huns; they were to make sure that the Chinese would not dare look askance at a single German for centuries to come. War broke out between Russia and Japan in 1904, followed first by the Russian Revolution and then by revolutions in Persia, Turkey, and, to some extent, India. Over the last few years, we have seen forks of lightning and storm clouds in China. France and Germany quarreled over Morocco, which resulted in Italy's attack on Tripoli, which, in turn, brought about the Balkan War. The driving force behind all these wars was the attempt to divide up areas not yet controlled by capitalism.

Until recently, Social Democracy possessed a very simple method for deciding which stance to take on a war. Whereas wars of aggression were rejected and damned, Social Democrats were required to support defensive wars. Comrade Bebel, who said so many fine things in his life, but who, like every other person, also said a few less exceptional things, once declared before the Reichstag that he would shoulder his rifle in the event of a defensive war, despite his advanced age. His advice is not very useful since the distinction between wars of aggression and wars of defense quickly melts away in our hands or bursts like soap bubbles. During the wars of the French Revolution, it was the French government that declared war, but these were nonetheless wars of defense that safeguarded the work of the revolution against reaction. Formally speaking, the war in the Balkans is an aggressive war against Turkey, but the leaders of the attacking nations are outdoing themselves in their assertion that they are defending both the most sacred national rights and the Christian faith against the Turks. And they, too, are not wrong. From this we must conclude that it is our duty, as proletarians, to reject all wars, be they wars of aggression or wars of defense. We must see them as resulting from imperialism, and just as we battle all manifestations of imperialism, so too must we battle every partial manifestation.

An emergency expedient within our tactics is that Social Democracy in Germany is founded on the Triple Alliance, which means that it supports the combined efforts of German, Austrian, and Italian diplomacy. Just a few weeks ago, when the new military bill was being debated in the Reichstag, Comrade David, on behalf of our faction, publicly declared to the government that we, as Social Democrats, support the Triple Alliance. It is deeply regrettable that his only qualification was that its members had to behave themselves and work toward freedom. Unfortunately, it didn't stop there. At nearly the same time, Comrade Renner made a similar statement on behalf of the Austrian Social Democrats before the Viennese parliament. To expect from the Triple Alliance – a capitalist alliance policy designed to prepare for war – that it should work toward peace is like wanting to pick plums from a thistle bush. One need only examine the results of the Triple Alliance to recognize this. The first consequence was that France was literally driven into its ignoble alliance with Russia, and England entered into the tripartite relationship with France and Russia. Another consequence is the monstrous German arms buildup against France and Russia, as well as the armament of Austria. And what contribution did the Triple Alliance make toward keeping the peace when one Triple Alliance power attacked Tripoli, and Austria annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina? When two or three capitalist states put their heads together, it is a platitude that their objective is the jugular of a fourth capitalist state. How naïve must someone be to expect that this alliance will act as a guarantor of peace? I know of just one international alliance that is a guarantor of peace. The only alliance that can be counted on to guarantee peace is the alliance of the international revolutionary proletariat!

We must also debunk another illusion that is causing confusion, namely, the illusion of disarmament. A few years ago, the English minister Grey delivered a fine speech in which he expressed his support for an arms agreement. No sooner had we heard this than a number of our comrades said to our Reichstag faction: Bravo, that man speaks wise words! They believed there was a way to move backwards from war

to peace. But when Grey gave this speech, he already had a new navy bill in his pocket, and instead of disarmament came monstrous rearmament. The situation in Germany was no different. In the Budget Commission, the minister of war mentioned an agreement with England – that turned a few heads! A German war minister who was holding an olive branch in his beak like a dove! In truth this was just the prelude to the egregious military bill. One must be blind not to see that arms are a necessary and natural consequence of the entire economic development. As long as capitalism prevails, arms and war will not cease. Capitalist states, both large and small, have now been sucked into the maelstrom of the arms race. It has always been the prerogative of Social Democracy to keep its head out of the clouds, to keep both feet firmly on the ground. We have always asked how political phenomena can be explained on the basis of capitalist developments. How we laughed at the pro-peace, bourgeois politicians, those good people and lousy musicians! It is hopeless utopianism to expect that our advocacy of disarmament will persuade capitalist states to stop arming themselves. Arms are a fatal consequence of the development of capitalism: this path leads to the abyss.

We must pursue an entirely different objective, one that clearly defines our historical task – the militia system, the arming of the people, as demanded in our party platform. We have a duty to tell the people that they must end their slavish obedience: that they must fight for their own interests. Even so, the demand for a militia is entirely different from disarming the ruling class; the militia system can only build on the strength of the proletariat. We are not deceiving ourselves – we do not believe that we can introduce a militia overnight. An army organization in which the people, bearing arms, decide whether or not they will go to war is not compatible with the dominance of the Krupps and the arms cartel. To introduce a militia, we must first overthrow the ruling class, which involves revolution, a major historical undertaking. Yet should this be the reason that we keep our demands carefully stored in the cabinet like family heirlooms, only to take them out on especially festive occasions?

No! We must express our demand for a militia every day in our political action program; the people must know that fulfillment of this demand requires the overthrow of Junker rule. We are now seeing a stormy protest against three-year military service in France, where opposition to slavish obedience to the military is stirring. Are German workers dumber, less capable, or less brave than the French? I believe that it is no accident that we have four million Social Democratic voters and that we can look back on fifty years of socialist history. The time will come when the German working class will also refuse to be ordered around, when they will rise up as one and say: “I don’t want to, I won’t!” (*Loud applause*).

One result of the arms madness is the disgraceful downfall of the parliamentary system. In Germany, all civil opposition has disappeared from the parliamentary process. There is not a single bill that is not approved by the government’s loyal Mamluks. The government need only whistle and the parliamentarians dance about their feet like poodles. We work hard during Reichstag elections to send as many representatives as possible to the Reichstag, but if there is a single worker out there who believes casting ballots is all that’s necessary, I can only pity him. Just as quickly as we are sending Social Democrats to parliaments, these parliaments are devolving into the fig leaves of absolutism. When the China expedition was being fitted out, representatives visited mothers, and afterward these representatives of the bourgeoisie granted indemnity for the allocated funds with sycophantic zeal. In England, where the ceremony of parliamentary hocus-pocus is especially well developed, conditions are the same, according to one English paper. The triply holy parliamentary system is well on the way to closing up shop. Austria and other states are no different from Germany and England: the parliamentary system is sinking ever deeper into the morass. We Social Democrats wouldn’t be worth a hill of beans if we pinned our hopes on it. The focus of Social Democratic politics must be shifted to the masses. The parliament, though important, must remain just one platform from which to spread the socialist word and rouse the masses. In recent years we have had sufficient proof that the masses can act when necessary. We are often told that we don’t yet have enough members and the tills are not yet full enough to carry out large operations. Oh, you small-minded bean counters! I don’t underestimate the value of

organization – indeed, we cannot value it highly enough – but it would be a grave mistake to assume that every single worker must be a registered party member before the grand march on capitalism can begin. Just recently, 400,000 men stood for ten days with their arms crossed to secure political rights in Belgium – never mind the fact that I did not consider the time ripe to lead them into battle. And the Belgian working class is not nearly as well organized as the German. The Russian Revolution also illustrates what the masses are capable of. In 1906 the Russian proletariat had neither unions nor political organizations, and just a few years later, strong proletarian organizations were forged in the furnaces of the Revolution.

We mustn't underestimate our power, the elemental power of large masses, since the danger of underestimating our power is perhaps greater than that of overestimating it. We must say to the proletarian masses that if now, after a fifty-year history, we have millions in our ranks, it not only entitles us to feel pride, but also obliges us to act. The larger we grow, the greater our obligation to throw our full weight into the balance. We must educate the masses to let them know that if the capitalists carve up the world, we are the heirs to their dangerous escapades. We must act with the same courage, determination and ruthlessness as the bourgeois revolutionaries. We must follow the words of Danton, who said that in certain situations one needs just three things: boldness, and again boldness, and always boldness (*Wild applause*).

Source: Rosa Luxemburg, "Die weltpolitische Lage", (Speech on May 27, 1913 in Leipzig-Plagwitz). *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, No. 121, May 29, 1913; reprinted in Rosa Luxemburg, *Gesammelte Werke*. East Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1970, vol. 3, pp. 212–19.

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Recommended Citation: Another View of Things: Rosa Luxemburg (1913), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/wilhelmine-germany-and-the-first-world-war-1890-1918/ghdi:document-781>> [September 26, 2025].