

Rosa Luxemburg

The Polish Question at the International Congress in London

(1896)

First Published: July 1896. This article appeared simultaneously in **Sprawa Robotnicza**, no.25, July 1896, and in the Italian publication, **Critica Sociale**, no.14, July 1896, where it was published in translation to Italian.

Source: **The National Question – Selected Writings by Rosa Luxemburg**, edited and introduced by the late Horace B Davis, Monthly Review Press, 1976.

Translated: Jurgen Hentze, **Rosa Luxemburg: Internationalismus und Klassenkampf** (Luchterhand: 1971), pp.142-52.

Transcription/Markup: Ted Crawford/Brian Basgen

Proofed: by Matthew Grant

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Thirty-two years ago, when what was later to become the International met for the first time in London, it opened its proceedings with a protest against the subjugation of Poland, which just then was engaged, for the third time, in a fruitless struggle for independence. In a few weeks the International Workers' Congress will meet, also in London, and will be presented with a resolution in support of Polish independence. The similarity of circumstances quite naturally suggests a comparison of these two events in the life of the international proletariat.

The proletariat has come a long way in its development over these past thirty-two years. Progress is evident in every regard, and many aspects of the working-class struggle look quite different from the way they did thirty-two years ago. But the essential element in this entire development lies in the following: *from a sect of ideologues, socialists have grown into a major unified party capable of handling its own affairs.* Then, they barely existed in isolated little groups outside the mainstream of political life in every country; today, they represent the dominant factor in the life of society. This is particularly true in the major civilized countries; but in every country they are an element to be taken seriously and to be reckoned with at every step by government and ruling class alike. Then, it was a question of merely spreading the new message; today, the paramount question is how the struggle of the vast popular masses, now thoroughly imbued with the gospel of socialism, can best be led toward its goal.

The International Workers' Congress has undergone corresponding changes. In its beginning, the International was more of a council that met to formulate the basic principles of the new movement; today, it is primarily, even exclusively, a body for practical deliberations by the conscious proletariat on the urgent questions of its day to day struggle. All tasks and objectives are here subjected to rigorous evaluation as to their practicability; those, however, that appear to exceed the forces of the proletariat are laid aside, regardless of how attractive or appealing they may sound. This is the essential difference between the conference this year in St. Martin's Hall and the one that took place thirty-two years ago, and it is from this perspective that the resolution laid before the Congress must be examined.

The resolution on the restoration of Poland to be presented at the London Congress reads as follows. [\[1\]](#)

Whereas, the subjugation of one nation by another can serve only the interests of capitalists and despots, while for working people in both oppressed and oppressor nation it is equally pernicious; and whereas, in particular, the Russian tsardom, which owes its internal strength and its external significance to the subjugation and partition of Poland, constitutes a permanent threat to the development of the international workers' movement, the Congress hereby resolves: that the independence of Poland represents an imperative political demand both for the Polish proletariat and for the international labor movement as a whole.

The demand for the political independence of Poland is supported by two arguments: first, the general perniciousness of annexations from the point of view of the interests of the proletariat; and second, the special significance of the subjugation of Poland for the continued existence of the Russian tsardom, and thus, by implication, the significance of Polish independence for its downfall.

Let us take the second point first.

The Russian tsardom derives neither its inner strength nor its external significance from the subjugation of Poland. This assertion in the resolution is false from A to Z. The Russian tsardom derives its inner strength from the social relations within Russia itself. The historical basis of Russian absolutism is a natural economy resting on the archaic communal-property relations of the peasantry. The remains of this backward social structure – and there are many such remains still to be found in Russia today – along with the total configuration of other social factors, constitute the basis of the Russian tsardom. The nobility is kept under the tsar's thumb by an endless flow of handouts paid for by taxing the peasantry. Foreign policy is conducted to benefit the bourgeoisie with the opening of new markets as its main objective, while customs policy puts the Russian consumer at the mercy of the manufacturers. Finally, even the domestic activity of the tsardom is in the service of capital: the organization of industrial expositions, the construction of the Siberian railroad, and other projects of a similar nature are all carried out with a view to advancing the interests of capitalism. In general, under the tsardom the bourgeoisie plays an inordinately important role in shaping domestic and foreign policy,

a role which its numerical inconsequence would never permit it to play without the tsar. This, then, is the combination of factors which gives the tsardom its strength internally. So it continues to vegetate, because the obsolete social forms have not yet completely disappeared, and the embryonic class relations of a modern society have not yet fully developed and crystallized.

Again: the strength of the tsardom abroad derives not from the partition of Poland, but from the particular features of the Russian Empire. Its vast human masses provide an unlimited source of financial and military resources, available almost on command, which elevates Russia to the level of a first-rate European power. Its vastness and geographic position give Russia a very special interest in the Eastern question, in which it vies with the other nations that are also involved in that part of the world. At the same time, Russia borders on the British possessions in Asia, which is leading it toward an inevitable confrontation with England. In Europe, too, Russia is deeply involved in the most vital concerns of the European powers. Especially in the nineteenth century, the revolutionary class struggles just now emerging have put the tsardom in the role of guardian of reaction in Europe, which fact also contributes to its stature abroad.

But above all, in speaking of Russia's foreign position, especially over the last few decades, it is not the partition of Poland but solely and exclusively the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine that lends it its power: by dividing Europe into two hostile camps, by creating a permanent threat of war, and by driving France further and further into the arms of Russia.

From false premises come false conclusions: as if the existence of an independent Poland could deprive Russia of its powers at home or abroad. The restoration of Poland could bring about the downfall of Russian absolutism only if it simultaneously abolished the social basis of the tsardom within Russia itself, i.e., the remains of the old peasant economy and the importance of the tsardom for both the nobility and the bourgeoisie. But of course this is arrant nonsense: it makes no difference – with or without Poland these relations remain unchanged. The hope of breaking the hold of Russian omnipotence through the restoration of Poland is an anachronism stemming from that bygone time when there seemed to be no hope that forces within Russia itself would ever be capable of achieving the destruction of the tsardom. The Russia of that time, a land of natural economy, seemed, as did all such countries, to be mired in total social stagnation. But since the sixties it has set a course toward the development of a modern economy and in so doing has sown the seeds for a solution to the problem of Russian absolutism. The tsardom finds itself forced to support a capitalist economy, but in so doing it is sawing off the limb on which it sits.

Through its financial policies it is destroying whatever remains of the old agricultural-communal relationships, and is thus eliminating any basis for conservative modes of thought among the peasantry. What is more, in its plundering of the peasantry, the tsardom is undermining its own material foundations and destroying the resources with which it purchased the loyalty of the nobility. Finally, the tsardom has apparently made it its special task to ruin the major class of consumers at the bourgeoisie's expense, thus

leaving with its pockets empty the very class to whose pecuniary interests it sacrificed the interests of the nation as a whole. Once a useful agent of the bourgeois economy, the ponderous bureaucracy has become its fetters. The result is the accelerated growth of the industrial proletariat, the one social force with which the tsardom cannot ally itself and to which it cannot give ground without jeopardizing its own existence.

These, then, are the social contradictions whose solution involves the downfall of absolutism. The tsardom is driving forward to that fatal moment like a rolling stone on a steep hill. The hill is the development of capitalism, and at its foot the iron fists of the working class are waiting. Only the political struggle of the proletariat throughout the entire Russian empire can accelerate this process. The independence of Poland has comparatively little to do with the fall of the tsardom, just as the partition of Poland had little to do with its continued existence.

Let us take now the first point of the resolution. “The subjugation of one nation by another,” we read, “can serve only the interests of capitalists and despots, while for working people in both oppressed and oppressor nation it is equally pernicious ...” On the basis of this proposition the independence of Poland is supposed to become an imperative demand of the proletariat. Here we have one of those great truths, so great, in fact, as to be one of the greatest of commonplaces, and as such it can lead to no practical conclusions whatsoever. If, from the assertion that the subjugation of one nation by another is in the interests of capitalists and despots, it is therefore concluded that all annexations are unjust or can be eliminated within the capitalist system, then this we hold to be absurd, for it makes no allowance for the basic principles of the existing order.

It is interesting to note that this point in the resolution is almost identical with the argument in support of the notorious Dutch resolution.^[2] “Since the subjugation and control of one nation by another can lie only in the interests of the ruling classes ... ,” the proletariat is supposed to bring about the end of the war with the aid of the striking military. Both resolutions are based on the naive belief that it is enough to recognize any circumstance benefiting despots to the detriment of working people in order to do away with it immediately. The similarity goes further. The evil that must be rooted out is, in principle, the same in both resolutions: the Dutch resolution proposes to prevent future annexations by ending the war, while the Polish resolution intends to undo past wars by abolishing annexations. In both cases, the proletariat is supposed to eliminate war and annexations under capitalism without eliminating capitalism itself, though both, in fact, are part of the very essence of capitalism.

Granted that the truism just cited does not give any basis for the general abolition of annexations, it provides even less of a reason for abolishing the existing Polish annexation. In this case especially, without a critical assessment of the concrete historical conditions, nothing of value can be contributed to the problem. But on this point, on the question of how – and if – the proletariat can liberate Poland, the resolution maintains a deep silence. The Dutch resolution is more sophisticated in this respect: it at least proposes a specific means – a secret accord with the military – which allows us to see the

utopian aspect of the resolution. The Polish resolution is more modest and contents itself with a “demand,” although it is not any less utopian on that account than the other.

How is the Polish proletariat to build a classless state? In the face of the three governments ruling Poland; in the face of the bourgeoisie of the Polish congress pandering to the throne in Petersburg and recoiling from any thought of a restored Poland as a crime and a plot against its own pocket-book; in the face of the large Galician landholdings in the person of the governing Badani,^[3] who watches over the unity of the Austrian monarchy (that is: guarantees the partition of Poland) and finally, in the face of the Prussian-Polish Junkers who provide the military budget and more supplies of bayonets to safeguard the Polish annexation – in the face of all these factors, what can the Polish proletariat do? Any rebellion would be bloodily suppressed. But if no rebellion is attempted, nothing at all can be done, since armed rebellion is the only way that Polish independence can be achieved. Certainly none of these states can be expected to voluntarily relinquish its provinces, which they have now ruled for a long hundred years. But under existing conditions, any rebellion of the proletariat would be crushed – there could be no other result. Perhaps then, the international proletariat would help? It, however, is in less of a position to act than the Polish proletariat; at most it can declare its sympathy. But suppose the entire campaign in support of the restoration of Poland limits itself to peaceful demonstrations? Well, then, in that case, of course, the partition states can continue to rule over Poland in all tranquillity. So if the international proletariat makes the restoration of Poland its political demand – as the resolution requires – it will have done no more than utter a pious wish. If one “demands” something, one must do something to achieve that demand. If one can do nothing, the empty “demand” may well make the air tremble, but it will certainly not shake the states ruling over Poland.

The adoption of the social-patriotic resolution by the International Congress could, however, have further-reaching implications than might be obvious at first glance. First and foremost, it would go in the face of the decisions of the previous Congress, especially those on the Dutch resolution about the military strike. In the light of their essentially parallel arguments and identical content, the adoption of the social-patriotic resolution would let the Dutch one in, once again, through the back door. How the Polish delegates, who voted against the Nieuwenhuis resolution, have now managed to propose what is essentially an identical resolution on that question, we shall not discuss for the moment. In any case, it would be worse if the entire Congress were to fall into such a contradiction with itself.

Secondly, this resolution, if adopted, would have an import for the Polish movement that the delegates to the up-coming Congress have surely not even dared to imagine. For the past three years – as I discussed at length in my essay in *Neue Zeit*, numbers 32 and 33^[4] – the attempt has been made to impose on Polish Socialists a program for the restoration of Poland; the intention is to separate them from their German, Austrian, and Russian comrades by uniting them in a Polish party organized along nationalist lines. Given the utopianism of this program and the contradiction between it and any effective political struggle, the promoters of this tendency have not yet been able to provide any argument for the planned nationalist turn strong enough to withstand criticism. And so they have,

up to now, been rather circumspect about any open disclosure of this tendency. While the Polish parties in the Prussian and Austrian sectors have not yet included the point concerning the restoration of Poland in their program, the advance guard of the nationalist tendency, the London group calling itself *Zwiazek Zagraniczny Socjalistow Polskich*,^[5] has been working hard to arouse sympathy in the Western European parties, especially through the paper **Bulletin Officiel** and in countless articles: *Socialist Poland*, *The Poland of the Workers*, *Democratic Poland*, *The Independent Republic of Poland*, etc. These and similar slogans have been praised in Polish, German, and French by turns. The way is being prepared for the adoption of a Polish class state into the program. The crowning touch to this entire process is to be the London congress, and through the adoption of the resolution the nationalist position is to be smuggled in under the international banner. The international proletariat is presumably supposed to run up the red flag, with its own hand, on the nationalist edifice, and so consecrate it as a temple of internationalism. Moreover, the sanction by the representatives of the international proletariat is meant to provide an effective cover for social patriotism's total lack of any scientific basis and raise it to the level of a dogma, where it will be immune to criticism of any sort. Finally, this sanction is meant to encourage the Polish parties to adopt, once and for all, the nationalist program and organize themselves along national lines.

The adoption of the social-patriotic resolution would establish an important precedent for the socialist movement in other countries. What is good for one is purchased cheaply by the other. If the national liberation of Poland is elevated to a political goal of the international proletariat, why not also the liberation of Czechoslovakia, Ireland, and Alsace-Lorraine? All these objectives are equally utopian, and are no less justified than the liberation of Poland. The liberation of Alsace-Lorraine, in particular, would be far more important for the international proletariat, and far more likely at that; behind Alsace-Lorraine stand four million French bayonets, and in questions of bourgeois annexations, bayonets carry more weight than moralistic demonstrations. And if the Poles in the three partitioned sectors organize themselves along nationalist lines for the liberation of Poland, why should the other nationalities in Austria not also do the same, why should the Alsatians not organize themselves with the French? In a word, the door would be opened wide to national struggles and nationalist organizations. Rather than a working class organized in accordance with political realities, there would be an espousal of organization along national lines, which often goes astray from the start. Instead of political programs, nationalist programs would be drawn up. Instead of a coherent political struggle of the proletariat in every country, its disintegration through a series of fruitless national struggles would be virtually assured.

Here lies the greatest significance of the social-patriotic resolution, if adopted. We stated at the beginning that the greatest forward step that the proletariat has made since the days of the International is its development from a number of small sectarian groups into a major party capable of handling its own affairs. But to what does the proletariat owe this progress? Solely to its ability to understand the primacy of the political struggle in its activity. The old International gave way to parties organized in each country in conformity with the political conditions peculiar to that country, without, on that account, having regard for the nationality of the workers. Only, political struggle in line with this

principle makes the working class strong and powerful. But the social-patriotic resolution pursues a course in diametric opposition to this principle. Its adoption by the Congress would repudiate thirty-two years of the proletariat's accumulated experience and theoretical education.

The social-patriotic resolution was formulated quite cleverly: behind the protest against the tsardom lay the protest against annexation – after all, the demand for Poland's independence is raised against Austria and Prussia as well as against Russia: it sanctions nationalist tendencies with international interests; it tries to obtain backing for a practical program on the basis of a general moral demonstration. But the weakness of its argument is even greater than the artfulness of its formulation: a few commonplaces about the perniciousness of annexations and some nonsense about Poland's importance for the tsardom – this and no more – is all that this resolution is capable of offering.

[1] The text of the resolution is reproduced here in the form presented by Rosa Luxemburg in her essay, **Der Sozialpatriotismus in Polen**, in **Neue Zeit**. Cf. **Collected Works**, I, I, 39ff.

[2] This is a reference to a Dutch draft resolution at the International Socialist Congress in Zurich in 1893. It was rejected in favor of a German resolution on the same theme. Cf. **Protokoll des Internationalen Sozialistischen Arbeiterkongresses in der Tonhalle Zurich vom 6 bis 12 August 1893**, Zurich 1894, p.25.

[3] The reference is to a member of the Polish nobility in Austrian Poland, who was Austrian Prime Minister from 1895 to 1897.

[4] *Neue Strömungen in der polnischen sozialistischen Bewegung in Deutschland and Österreich* (*New Tendencies in the Polish Socialist Movement in Germany and Austria*), in **Collected Works**, I, I.

[5] Foreign Union of Polish Socialists, a special committee associated with the PPS.

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Last updated on: 27.11.2008