

The Anarchists versus the Plague

Malatesta and the Cholera Epidemic of 1884

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In 1884, cholera tore through Italy, claiming thousands of lives. Despite a three-year prison sentence hanging over his head, Errico Malatesta joined other revolutionary anarchists on a daring mission to Naples—the heart of the epidemic—to treat those suffering from the disease. In so doing, he and his comrades demonstrated an alternative to coercive state policies that remains relevant today in the age of COVID-19.

The following text recounts the story of the outbreak and Malatesta's intervention, including all the available primary materials about the Italian anarchists' participation, some of which have not previously appeared in English. Much of the historical background is drawn from Frank M. Snowden's excellent *Naples in the Time of Cholera, 1884–1911*. Thanks to Davide Turcato, the editor of Malatesta's complete works; the *Centre International de Recherches sur l'Anarchisme* in Lausanne; and radical archivists and librarians everywhere who preserve anarchist history, enabling us to learn from the past.

“In 1884, cholera blighted several parts of Italy, being especially virulent in Naples. According to the prefect's statistics, cholera affected upwards of 14,000 people in the province, killing 8000 of them, of whom 7000 perished in the city of Naples alone. The state reacted by imposing a crackdown: the city was placed under martial law, restrictions on movements were imposed, using methods similar to those employed on the occasion of the Messina earthquake or the more recent quake in L'Aquila. The volunteers from the White Cross, Red Cross, social democrats, republicans, and socialists adopted quite a different approach. Felice Cavallotti, Giovanni Bovio, Andrea Costa, and Errico Malatesta, no less, were active on the streets of Naples. And not without some risk to their own health: the socialist volunteers Massimiliano Boschi, Francesco Valdrè, and Rocco Lombardo caught cholera and perished.”

—Alessia Bruni Cavallazzi's elegy for Florentine Lombard, an English anarchist who served in the Red Cross during the epidemic

Malatesta and other comrades from various parts of Italy went to Naples as medical volunteers to care for those stricken by a cholera epidemic. Two anarchists, Rocco Lombardo and Antonio Valdrè, died there, taken by the illness. The well-known anarchist Galileo Palla especially distinguished himself by his selflessness, energy, and spirit of sacrifice. As a former medical student, Malatesta was entrusted with a section of sick people; they had a particularly high recovery rate because he knew how to force the city of Naples to turn over food and medicine in abundance, which he distributed liberally. He was offered an official decoration, the order of good merit, which he refused. When the epidemic ended, the anarchists left Naples and published a manifesto explaining that “the true cause of cholera is poverty, and the true medicine to prevent its return can be nothing less than social revolution.”

—Luigi Fabbri's “Life of Malatesta”¹

¹ Fabbri's account largely echoes Max Nettlau's version, published a few years earlier in *Errico Malatesta: The Biography of an Anarchist*: “In the autumn of 1884, Malatesta and other comrades went to Naples, where the cholera had taken alarming proportions, and worked in the hospitals. Costa and other Socialists did the same. Two Anarchists, Rocco Lombardo, the former editor of the Turin ‘Proximus Tuns,’ and Antonio Valdre succumbed to the epidemic. Those who returned stated in a manifesto that the real cause of cholera was misery and the real remedy the social revolution (c. ‘Revolte,’ September 28, Dec. 7, 1884; Nov. 8, 1885).”

Was “the true cause of cholera” indeed poverty, or was that just ideological rhetoric? Read on and decide for yourself.

The Origins of Italy—and Italian Anarchism

Italy was still a new country when the cholera epidemic struck in 1884. To understand why Naples was hit so hard and what it meant that anarchists traveled there from all around the country in solidarity, we have to back up two decades.

Until 1861, there was no such thing as Italy. The peninsula was divided up into various kingdoms and duchies under many different local rulers. The original proponents of Italian unification were nationalists like Giuseppe Mazzini, who called on revolutionary republicans around Europe to overthrow the old monarchs and establish new nations on the basis of shared language, geography, and “unity of purpose.” The idea was that rich and poor should work together in solidarity beneath the banner of the nation.

In fact, people on the Italian peninsula did not possess a common language or culture. Many of the dialects spoken on different parts of the peninsula were mutually unintelligible; there were massive cultural and economic differences between different regions. Mazzini was seeking to invent a common language and culture where none existed, in order to create the foundation for a competitive modern state.

Contrary to their intentions, those who sought to carry out Mazzini’s program of national liberation ultimately brought about the unification of Italy under a monarchy. Revolutionaries like Giuseppe Garibaldi risked their lives in guerrilla warfare to unify the peninsula as a republic, but whenever they succeeded in toppling one king, another simply assumed control of the area, until King Victor Emmanuel of Sardinia ruled all of Italy. Once he came to power, King Victor Emmanuel did not work beneath the banner of the nation for the betterment of all Italians; rather, he immediately set about looting the southern part of the peninsula to enrich his own coffers. In imagining that all Italians could share a common interest, Mazzini had failed to apprehend the class conflict at the basis of capitalist society.

In exile in London in 1864, Mazzini participated in the founding of the International Workingmen’s Association, a worldwide federation of labor unions. Karl Marx forced Mazzini out early on, only to lose control of the International to anarchists like Mikhail Bakunin. Bakunin was himself a former participant in national liberation struggles who had become disillusioned with the shortfalls and betrayals of nationalism.

Born outside Naples in 1853, Errico Malatesta grew up participating in one of Mazzini’s secret societies; studying medicine at the University of Naples, he was expelled and imprisoned for participating in a Mazzinist protest. Yet under the reign of King Victor Emmanuel, he saw firsthand that being ruled by an Italian king was no better than being ruled by a monarch of any other nationality. By the time of the Paris Commune in spring 1871, Malatesta and his comrades were seeking a new approach to social change.

In Italy, it was Bakunin, not Marx, who represented the chief alternative to Mazzini’s nationalism. Malatesta and his comrades joined the International in association with Bakunin and other anti-authoritarians throughout Europe. Arguably, the radicalization of the Italian section of the International marked the emergence of anarchism as a full-fledged social movement. It also had a significant impact on working-class organizing in Italy, where anarchism remained the most pow-

erful current in the labor movement for many years afterwards, shaping the anti-authoritarian ethos of grassroots organizations in Naples and elsewhere around the peninsula.

Malatesta committed himself to a life of revolutionary struggle, helping to establish mutual aid associations for workers throughout Italy and participating in open insurrections in 1874 and 1877. All this attracted the attention of the authorities, leading to a series of court cases and prison terms. In 1883, after years in exile, Malatesta returned to Italy to publish a newspaper and resume organizing.

Naples on the Eve of the Epidemic

In 1884, over half a million people lived in Naples, making it Italy's most populous city. Much of the population consisted of former peasants uprooted from the countryside working as craftsmen or venders or else simply unemployed. Wages in Italy were among the lowest in Europe, and in Naples they were lower than in any other Italian city. Rent accounted for at least half of the total expenditures of each family. Illegal capitalist organizations set the price of food and worked with the municipal authorities to control what kind of criminal activity was possible.

Following Italian unification, Naples had lost its status as the seat of a monarchy. Consequently, power and wealth remained concentrated in the hands of an elite class, without the economic dynamism that could cause them to trickle down to the rest of the population. Scant resources were invested in public health structures of any kind. Hospitals were unhygienic, overcrowded, and ill-equipped, possessing a well-deserved bad reputation. The right-wing party controlled the government; the left-wing party represented a *loyal opposition* that simply asked for petty reforms, while the Catholic Church was powerful enough to constitute a third pole in society.

Anarchists saw no possibility for meaningful reform within this system. Instead, they focused on building up grassroots networks via which workers, peasants, and poor people could circulate resources to ensure their collective survival, defend each other against injustices, and spread a vision of a world in which power, resources, and freedom would be shared among all.

Some elements of this setting are analogous to our situation today, when a post-industrial economy has left a large part of the population without stable employment or savings. Austerity measures have gutted public health services to enrich a wealthy few, while the political system has repeatedly failed those who seek to bring about social change.

July 1884: Cholera Arrives in France

Cholera and imperial war were inextricably connected. In 1883, Indian soldiers serving in the British troops that were occupying Egypt brought cholera to the northern coast of Africa, where it killed 60,000 people. In 1884, French troops were engaged in a colonial campaign for control of Indo-China, during which an epidemic swept through the war-torn region. Cholera rode the military supply chain back to the Mediterranean, arriving at the French port of Toulon and spreading to Marseilles by June 25.

The public and the press recognized that French military intervention was the source of the epidemic. Demonstrations and widespread graffiti denounced the French government's policy of colonial expansion. In France as well as Italy, anarchists understood that the colonial domination

of other peoples benefitted the ruling class of the colonizers while endangering ordinary people on both sides.

In 1884, well over 200,000 Italians lived in France. The majority were former small landowners or renters who had been engaged in agriculture until the expansion of the world market drove them out of business and across the border to seek employment—exactly the same way that the North American Free Trade Agreement uprooted countless Mexican *campesinos* and pushed them across the US border 110 years later. The highest concentrations were in Toulon and Marseilles, with Italian populations of 10,000 and 60,000, respectively. These were also the French cities hit hardest by cholera—and the epidemic hit the poor immigrant communities worst.

“A very large proportion of the victims at Toulon and Marseilles were Italians,” the *New York Times* reported. The death rate for Italian immigrants may have approached 1 in 10. In *Naples in the Time of Cholera*, Frank M. Snowden describes an apocalyptic atmosphere:

The streets were sprinkled with carbolic acid in an attempt to “drown” the choleraic germs; tar and sulphur bonfires were lit at every corner to purify the air; public gatherings of every kind were forbidden; railroad passengers and their baggage were fumigated; and the sewers were flushed. The urban landscape was suddenly transformed beyond recognition by fire, pungent smoke, the unfamiliar smell of acid and the near-desertion of the streets. In this threatening environment, all economic activity halted as factories and shops closed. Provisions became nearly impossible to find, and those who remained anxiously watched for the first premonitory symptoms, convinced that they were inhaling poison with every breath.

In July 1884, while state-sponsored experts from the French Academy of Medicine were still attempting to deny that an outbreak of bona fide cholera was taking place, many Italians were interned in the Pharo hospital in Marseilles. Here, the middle-class French doctors smoked cigars constantly in order to create what they imagined to be a protective smokescreen between themselves and their underclass patients; the doctors experimented with a variety of speculative treatments, including electrical shock. In the first weeks of the epidemic, the fatality rate at Pharo hospital was a terrifying 95%.

To make matters worse, the crisis also intensified bigotry against Italian immigrants. For the French government and ruling class, this was an opportunity to get rid of what some of them regarded as an unruly part of the surplus population. Driven by the threat of death from the epidemic as well as xenophobic attacks and aggressive government policies, tens of thousands of Italians fled back across the border—bringing the epidemic with them.

For all of these reasons, Italian anarchists immediately concerned themselves with the epidemic as it spread along the French coast in July 1884.

At this time, Malatesta was in Florence, Italy, editing the anarchist periodical *La Questione Sociale*. Driven from Italy by police pressure after the failed insurrection of 1877, he had lived in France, England, and Egypt—where, according to Luigi Fabbri, he attempted to join the anti-colonial insurrection led by Ahmed ‘Urabi, the same insurrection that British troops had been brought from India to repress.

Upon his return to Italy in 1883, Malatesta was jailed for six months on fabricated charges of “subversive association,” a form of nebulous conspiracy charge that the Italian state has employed to hamstring anarchist organizing for a century and a half now. In January 1884, without ever coming before a jury, Malatesta was sentenced to three years in prison, but released pending his appeal. These are the conditions in which he and his comrades were organizing and publishing.

The following article from the July 1884 issue of *La Questione Sociale*, quite possibly written by Malatesta himself, sets forth how Malatesta and his comrades understood the causes of the epidemic. Their theory that cholera originated in polluted river deltas was shared by most educated Italian doctors at the time, though it has since been surpassed by modern research. On the other hand, their argument that capitalism fails to provide an impetus for addressing collective problems remains as timely now as the day it was written. The appendix, a translation of a letter from a Parisian carpenter, is especially chilling to read in a time when capitalists are urging us to go back to work even at risk of death by COVID-19 and a part of the working class is eager to comply.

Il Colera

Cholera is in France: perhaps it will invade much of Europe.

Satisfied people usually accuse us of bias and exaggeration when we attribute the greatest part of the evils that afflict humanity to the prevailing social order. They willingly talk about chance or fate (natural laws) and try to separate the question of responsibility from them and from the social system that produces or supports them, blaming unconscious nature, and often intemperance, or the unexpected, or a thousand other popular vices.

We will see that these people, who always consider other people’s pain and misery necessary and inevitable, also have recourse to *natural law* when it comes to cholera, which makes its periodic appearance among humans inescapable or even useful. We argue that the existence of cholera, and its appearance in Europe and the environment conducive to its development that it finds among us, are the fault of the current social system.

Cholera (at least the Asian variety, which is the only truly fearsome one) comes from the Ganges Delta, as the plague once came from the Nile Delta, and as yellow fever still comes from the Mississippi Delta, desolating parts of America and West Africa and continually threatening Europe.

These diseases derive from the swamps that form in the deltas of rivers that are abandoned to themselves, due to the rotting corpses and other organic materials that those immense currents bring to deposit there. Part of the Nile river delta has been remediated; the plague has almost completely disappeared in Egypt and been completely forgotten in Europe. Why not remediate the delta of the Ganges as well?

It might take a lot of work, immense expenditures, but what would that be compared to what governments spend on unproductive or harmful things? What would be the inconvenience or expense of a campaign by European peoples against cholera, com-

pared with the moral and material damage inflicted by one of those wars between peoples that are so often repeated?

The delta of the Ganges has not been remediated, because that work has not hitherto lent itself to private speculation, via which a few capitalists could have enriched themselves on the sweat and death of the impoverished people of India, and because in the absence of solidarity in which we live, rivalry, selfishness, and patriotism prevent all peoples from contributing freely to improving the soil on which one of these peoples lives, instead fueling hatreds and wars.

Perhaps that delta and all the great unhealthy plagues that corrupt the world will not be healed until the economic and political conditions of humanity are completely transformed—that is, until the world belongs to everyone and everyone has the right and the means to work towards improving it, until nobody can claim an exclusive right over a part of the soil and erect obstacles to prevent people from remediating it, until all the forces that are employed in rebellion and repression today, in wars and preparations for wars, or that are left latent and inactive, can be applied in useful ways and, increased a hundredfold by collective association, return to humanity all the power that we can achieve vis-à-vis the natural environment.

But isn't it ridiculous to speak of the remediation of the Ganges—and here, in Italy, when the marshes that are close to us are not remediated, when on the contrary, they increasingly enlarge their deadly zone!

And this cholera that we could eliminate but do not do because of our form of social organization, this cholera from which we do not free India and that India sends us from time to time, as if to remind us that man never sins with impunity against human solidarity—did this cholera come to Europe by itself, carried by the winds, without it being anyone's fault?

No, not even. On the contrary, it seems that the government of the French republic gave it to us. *Civilized* France goes to conquer *barbarian* Asia and its ships, more or less victorious, carry the terrible scourge back within them. We, *civilized peoples*, inflict massacre and desolation upon the *barbarians* with bayonets and cannons, and the *barbarians* send back massacre and desolation through cholera. Oh human family! Except that the massacre that we carry out is voluntary, inflicted for the purpose of robbery, whereas the revenge of the *barbarians* is involuntary and unconscious. So who is more barbaric?

And aren't there unsanitary homes here in Europe, bad and insufficient food, exhausting work, isn't it poverty (the daughter of individualized property) that makes it possible for the Asiatic disease to spread? When the danger is upon us, the hygienic commissions busy themselves promulgating measures that would be laughable for their impotence if they did not make one cry, or suggestions that succeed only in expressing a bloody irony. You hear these big shots from universities or health councils preach *Eat healthy food and avoid overwork*. And when the farmers who earn an average of 27 cents a day and live on spoiled polenta and water that is not always clean ask for better living conditions, the government that pays university students and health advisers (with the people's money, of course) imprisons the peasants and

puts its soldiers at the disposal of the owners. And the doctors who should renounce their office, which has been rendered useless, and place the responsibility on the government and owners for their murderous activities, continue to report and dictate advice!

Meanwhile, cholera continues to spread slowly, and perhaps soon it will erupt with fearsome energy. And it will inflict more deaths and more pain than ten revolutions, just one of which would be enough to eliminate cholera and a thousand other ailments forever. Yet for a while, tender hearts will continue to fear *revolutionary* excesses!

We present below a faithful translation of a letter that a Parisian carpenter addressed days ago to the daily socialist newspaper *Le Cri du Peuple* ("The Cry of the People"). It is an authentic letter, to which only a few corrections of form have been made: it is grim, wild, but it vividly describes the conditions of struggle that the bourgeoisie have imposed on the workers, it truly expresses the mood of the most energetic, most *dangerous* members of the proletariat.

Bourgeois men, if selfishness has not reduced you completely to foolishness, meditate on this letter; think what would happen to you if on a day of revolution you met these workers who, thanks to your deeds, have retained only one hope, to have to manufacture many coffins, and... but it is useless; you will remain as you are and what is fated will come to pass.

« Some who hear that cholera is among us feel their stomachs turn in fear. On the contrary, rather than being afraid, I call out to cholera: Hail! And come early.

« Life is hard. It's bad. I am a good worker and I love my job. The smell of wood widens my chest. How beautiful are the long shavings which curl, carried away with great strokes of a plane! What a beautiful sound the axes make under hammer blows! I am never as happy as when great drops of sweat fall on my bench from my wet forehead.

« I have no more work! I haven't had a job for two months. The bosses all have—as far as they say—too many workers and not enough commissions. Two months without working! A little longer and my hands will become soft and white like a gentleman's. But meanwhile, everything is in the pawnshop... In the cupboard there is nothing but hunger. There's nothing in my room besides a nail and a piece of rope. Keep them, I say, they can always be useful.

« I went from door to door offering my skills for cheap. Nothing. I've traveled throughout the region. I walked for miles along the white roads, beside which sad elm trees die of thirst. Every time I heard the striking of a hammer in the distance, the screeching of a saw, my heart beat faster. Wretched hope! Yes, hope rises once again! But no, nothing. Everywhere the same thing, and I returned in the evening, when I could not take any more, heartbroken, starved, with a dry throat and the soles of my shoes a little more worn than the day before.

« How do you want me and all who are like me not to shout: Hail cholera? Leaning forward, full of hope, we stretch out our arms and shake our hats, as we do when we see the face of a long awaited friend appear at the turn of a road. So let him come and be quick! In his bony green hands, in the folds of his poisoned cloak, he carries the *disease* of work; work for us. If he comes, the Asiatic, there will be a need for coffins. I can make coffins, I can!

« Big ones and small ones. Some beautiful, some ordinary. For rich and for poor. In oak and in fir. Here it is. Be served. There will be one for everyone. Just ask. Who's next? Come on, go on with the plan! What? Is it my fault that to live, I need others to die? And hundreds, thousands. Then we, the workers, will have work and we will be able to ask for whatever compensation we want; and we will make merry! Long live cholera.

« You are not afraid of us, scourge. If you have to break our barely living bodies, thank you. It is already no fun to lead the life we lead. But as we wait for you to take us to hell, you will certainly drop some coins in our pockets, and we will laugh at you. Be as bad as you like, you're not as murderous as the lack of work, nor as selfish as the bourgeois, nor as cruel as the exploiter.

« Come. My arms are strong enough to make coffins for all Paris, if you want. Fear? Away then! Hail cholera!

August 1884: Cholera Reaches Italy

In Italy, representatives of the Catholic Church took advantage of the situation to describe the epidemic as the judgment of God on a secular society—specifically as a punishment for the spread of socialism and atheism. They urged people to prostrate themselves in repentance rather than adhering to safety measures.

The state resurrected quarantine procedures from the previous century's protocol for dealing with bubonic plague, mobilizing the military to form a cordon across the French border. Their policies seemed vacillating and arbitrary; at first, they detained travelers for three days, then for five days, then for seven. Upon release from quarantine, all passengers and their belongings were fumigated with sulphur and chlorine or disinfected with carbolic acid, corrosive sublimate, or bichloride of mercury. This had no medical effect other than to irritate the lungs. Its chief purpose was to create a dramatic spectacle, so that the state would be seen taking action against the epidemic.

For a modern equivalent, we need look no further than governments pouring resources into fumigating entire cities in response to COVID-19, when the vast majority of cases are spread by person to person contact.

Twice displaced, refugees returning to Italy were not eager to be trapped in camps; many of them eluded the military cordon, traveling illegally through the hills. As cases of cholera nonetheless appeared in one region of Italy after another, further military cordons were deployed all around the country. (This is reminiscent of the aforementioned "subversive association" charges with which the Italian state has attempted to control anarchists by imposing regional limits on travel right up to the present day.) The internal cordons interrupted the economy, imposed

famine, generated fear, and spread xenophobia and paranoia around Italy. Some superstitious people came to regard traveling strangers as malefactors intent on spreading disease, just as today ignorant conservatives attribute COVID-19 to some sort of Chinese plot—when they aren't calling it a Democratic hoax.

By any measure, the attempt to stop cholera via military blockade was a dismal failure. The state was always two steps behind the epidemic—and its heavy-handed interventions only induced people to conceal news of new outbreaks. As Snowden argues,

“In the dawning age of scientific medicine, sound public health policies depended on accurate and prompt information. The threat of military force was instead the best way to sever the lines of communication between the populace and the authorities. Worse still, to move large numbers of soldiers, largely drawn from high-risk social groups, from locality to locality in unsanitary conditions was itself an excellent means of spreading an epidemic. A large part of the history of cholera was the story of the movement of young men in uniform.”

This phenomenon is familiar today, when the police of New York City and Detroit have played a major role in spreading COVID-19, bringing it from one neighborhood to the next and turning jails and prisons into death camps.

The first Italian city to experience a major outbreak of cholera was la Spezia, a port city like Toulon. The first deaths were concealed from medical officials, but after cholera contaminated the water supply and fatalities skyrocketed, the military sealed off the city completely, imposing famine and panic. In mid-September, there were two days of desperate fighting as the inhabitants attempted to break through the military cordon by force.

In order to deal with the vast numbers of refugees in quarantine, the Italian authorities established *lazarretos*—quarantine camps—including one on an island immediately outside Naples. In these confinement centers, guards forced refugees to trade the last of their belongings for food; the contagion made its way back to Naples via these ill-gotten goods. These quarantine camps remind us of concentration camps like the one on the isle of Lesbos, in which European governments intern refugees today; in some cases, it remains official government policy to seize refugees' belongings in return for confining them. These modern-day camps, too, see periodic rioting as refugees struggle to assert their humanity.

By the end of August 1884, people in Naples were dying in such great numbers that it was no longer possible to conceal the arrival of cholera. The military quarantine had not contained the outbreak—it had spread it to Italy's largest city.

September 1884: The Epidemic in Naples

The military had failed. Now it was up to health officials to treat the epidemic.

Whenever officials learned of a person who was suspected of having cholera, they dispatched a team of guards accompanied by a doctor to seize the sick person and convey him or her to the hospital; then a disinfection squad would show up to destroy or disinfect the sick person's belongings. At first, the hospital did not even have beds to accommodate the people who were conveyed to it.

In addition, officials initiated a campaign to “cleanse” the city by building great bonfires of sulfur every night at every street corner and in every square. These made the already polluted air nearly unbreathable. The city also posted notices everywhere—in the north Italian idiom, rather than the local Neapolitan dialect—explaining that people could protect themselves from the disease by living in clean and airy rooms, adhering to a healthy diet of high-quality food, drinking purified water, and avoiding both public restrooms and emotional stress... in short, by being part of the ruling class.

The officials also did some useful things, such as establishing housing and meals for the very poor, and some harmless things, like whitewashing the walls. But cholera had entered the city’s drinking water, and the death rate soon rose to well over one out of every 100 people. At the pace that bodies were piling up, it became impossible to bury all of the dead. Some were heaped into mass graves, others left to rot where they lay.

The middle class and the aristocracy fled the city. This time, the class-conscious military made no effort to stop them. The government banned public assemblies, but desperate people crowded together at churches to beg for mercy or roved the streets in religious processions, demanding donations and attacking those who could not pay.

In 1884, scientists knew of no effective treatment for cholera. The doctors in Naples experimented with a wide range of approaches, from irrigating the intestines with acid to administering electrical shocks, strychnine, and subcutaneous injections of saline solution. Many of these treatments only hastened patients’ deaths. Those who survived the hospitals told horror stories about the experiments that doctors were conducting upon those in their care.

As a result, and owing to the association of these doctors with the guards who accompanied them and the invasive measures of the state, popular opinion turned against the doctors. Many people also considered it suspicious that these wealthy gentlemen (who could afford clean water and sanitary living conditions) were so rarely afflicted by the disease. People regularly assaulted doctors when they entered poor neighborhoods, repeatedly triggering riotous confrontations with the military.

With the wealthy having fled, municipal efforts to clean out the sewers and whitewash the walls were read metaphorically as part of an effort to erase and exterminate the poor. As Snowden recounts,

During September 1884, a great phobia of poisoning gripped the city of Naples. Fearing that the municipal officials were engaged in a diabolical plot to eliminate surplus population, the people reasoned that cholera was literal class warfare. The health officials, doctors, and municipal guards who suddenly appeared in the back lanes of Old Naples were [regarded as] the agents of a deadly conspiracy. Their mission was to kill off the poor, and their weapon was poison.

Such a response, of course, is unintelligible except in the context of the long-term and deeply rooted suspicion of the people towards authority.

In such an unequal society, the authorities had long ago earned this suspicion. The residents of Naples felt betrayed by the power structure that ruled them from northern Italy, just as the poor of Naples felt betrayed by the Neapolitan ruling class. As September progressed, massive clashes unfolded between soldiers and townspeople, escalating to gun battles. There were riots in two

of the city's prisons. As Naples descended into chaos, public health policies were rendered moot. Like the army, state health officials had failed to address the situation.

The Grassroots Response

Fortunately, state institutions were not the only ones to respond to the epidemic.

The first grassroots response was organized by ordinary workers in Naples like the ones Malatesta had organized with in the 1870s. On August 29, the Società Operaia ("Workers' Society"), a radical mutual aid organization founded in 1861, announced a new initiative intended to provide assistance to anyone whose family had been struck by cholera. This "sanitary company" involved a handful of trusted doctors accompanied by ordinary laborers serving as nurses. Drawing on the Società Operaia's scant funds, they offered medication, clean blankets, food, and financial assistance to the ill and the bereaved alike. Wanting nothing to do with the hospitals or the city government, they treated cholera patients in their own homes, only going where they were explicitly invited. Being connected to workers throughout the poor neighborhoods of Naples, they were able to spread the news about their services through word of mouth.

A week later, on September 4, a middle-class newspaper editor named Rocco de Zerbi convened a meeting involving the Società Operaia, the medical faculty of the University of Naples, representatives of the press, and various local notables. The idea was to establish a citywide organization that scaled up the workers' "sanitary company." As often happens, the initial efforts by radical grassroots organizers had drawn middle-class activists with more resources who were convinced that they could do a better job at what ordinary people had started themselves. The organization that emerged from this meeting, officially named the Committee for the Assistance of the Victims of Cholera, came to be known colloquially as the White Cross.

Workers' associations continued to coordinate grassroots efforts throughout the city—but owing to the resources and credentials of its sponsors, the White Cross received the credit for everything in the international media and subsequent historiography. This is not surprising, considering that the budget of the White Cross ended up being 200 times greater than initial funds that the Società Operaia had raised. All the same, the White Cross depended on the workers' contacts and the trust that radical labor organizations had earned among the poor and angry.

The influence of the workers' associations and the wariness of the workers compelled the White Cross to adhere to a fundamentally anti-authoritarian approach. In order to ensure that no one would doubt their good intentions, the White Cross was comprised entirely of unpaid volunteers. Rather than trying out experimental treatments on patients, White Cross volunteers stuck to providing palliative care and distributing fresh blankets, sheets, mattresses, disinfectants, and food. They never carried weapons with them, and they did not insist on compulsory fumigation or on destroying the property of cholera patients. Learning from the initiative of the Società Operaia, they distanced themselves from the state, only offering assistance when asked and refusing to have anything to do with the guards who attended the state-directed doctors.

As de Zerbi wrote afterwards,

I never allowed a merger between our medical service and that of the city. Any such merger would have made us official and would thereby have destroyed our work... because the public would have feared and shunned us.

While middle-class activists were adopting the model demonstrated by grassroots organizers, other less savory characters were vying to present themselves as the saviors of Naples.

King Umberto, the son of Victor Emmanuel under whom Italy had been unified, arrived in Naples on September 9. Umberto was a reactionary conservative, loathed by workers and radicals throughout Italy for his policies. The year he had come to power, in 1878, the anarchist Giovanni Passannante had attempted to assassinate him; years after the epidemic, in 1900, the anarchist Gaetano Bresci succeeded in killing Umberto to take revenge for the king's decision to reward a general who had over 300 demonstrators massacred in cold blood in 1898. (Incidentally, shortly before this, Bresci also risked his life to disarm a would-be assassin who was shooting at Malatesta.) Umberto was no friend to the poor.

Umberto's regime had been feuding with the Catholic Church; his visit to Naples was calculated to repair this relationship, consolidating conservatism in Italy. Other ruling class institutions, such as the Bank of Naples, were looking for ways to re-stabilize the economy through philanthropy. If the monarchy, the Church, and the top tier of financial capitalists succeeded in presenting themselves as the ones looking out for the people of Naples, they would legitimize their power, making it more difficult for organizers to mobilize people to resist the various forms of oppression that preserved their privileges.

And all the while, thousands were dying in Naples.

The Anarchists in Naples

These were the stakes as Malatesta and other anarchists from around Italy sought to depart for Naples. They had been organizing solidarity efforts for those affected by the cholera outbreak since early August. They were eager to join in the grassroots relief efforts on the ground; Malatesta himself had grown up in Naples and studied medicine once. The prison sentence hanging over his head did not deter him. Yet until early September, Malatesta and his comrades in Florence had not been able to raise enough money to pay for the trip.

In "Galileo Palla and the events of Rome (May 1, 1891)," published in the May 23, 1891 issue of the weekly newspaper *La Rivendicazione* ("The Demand") in Forlì,² Malatesta recalls how he met Galileo Palla, an anarchist who helped fund their trip, and praises Palla's tireless efforts once they arrived in Naples.

I met Palla in Florence in 1884. Cholera raged in Naples, and there were many of us among the Socialists who yearned to hurry to the rescue of those who suffered from cholera. While we were trying to collect the money for the trip, Palla arrived, who was also going to Naples, and as he had more money than he needed for the railway ticket, he stopped in Florence to see if he could provide assistance to anyone who was willing to go but could not leave for lack of money.

He came to my house shouting and gesturing. "How," he addressed me, "How is it that you are not going to Naples!"

—"Who are you?" I asked.

² This article was later reproduced in the October 1, 1933 issue of *Studi Sociali* in Montevideo, which was where we read it, thanks to the assistance of Davide Turcato.

— “What do you care?” was his answer. “Those suffering from cholera do not need to know the name of who is at their bedside.”

“That’s right,” I said—“Several of us here want to go, but we have not yet been able to put together the money for the trip.” Then Palla emptied his pockets on the table, and so between his money and what we could find in Florence, we were able to leave—Gigia Pezzi, Arturo Feroci, Vinci, Delvecchio, myself, and other companions.

Palla’s conduct in Naples was splendid. Brave, indefatigable, night and day he was always at work. We were all without money, sometimes we went hungry and almost envied the soup that we served to the convalescents. Palla received some money from his home, which was largely based on his needs; but, as each of us would have done, he put it in common so we could all survive until the end of the epidemic.

Ask the anarchists nothing, Rocco De Zerbi—you cannot have forgotten the services of the anarchists of Florence if you remember a tall, thin, rather grumpy-looking young man who, in the moments when he expected responsibilities to be distributed, hung out at the back of the White Cross Committee room, silent, behind everyone, but who, at the first request for a volunteer, would leap up, before anyone else, and come forward shouting: “Me! I will!”

“But you,” they would point out, sometimes, “you are off shift now.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he would reply, “I can go back in.” And he went back in and amazed everyone with his truly extraordinary physical endurance, winning admiration for the heart, the devotion, the delicacy that he put into caring for the sick. That young man was Palla.³

This memoir indicates how closely Malatesta, Palla, and others worked with the White Cross in Naples—and provides a hint at the character of that relationship.

By September 13, over 1000 volunteers had joined the relief effort from all over Italy as well as Switzerland, France, England, and Sweden. Relative to the efforts of the state, the mobilization was a tremendous success. Roughly two thirds of the patients in the care of the White Cross volunteers survived; this stands in marked contrast to the death rates in hospitals in Naples, in which the majority of cholera patients died.

Anarchists were at the forefront of these efforts. According to Nunzio Dell’Erba (see appendix), Malatesta and Palla were joined in Naples by other comrades from Florence including Luigia Minguzzi, Francesco Pezzi, Arturo Feroci, Giuseppe Cioci, and Pietro Vinci, not to mention many other anarchists from all around the peninsula. We don’t know how many of them contracted cholera in the course of their work, but we know that two anarchists died of it—Antonio Valdrè and Rocco Lombardo—as well as the socialist Massimiliano Boschi.

³ Malatesta continues: “After the cholera epidemic in Naples, I have always been in contact or in intimate relationship with Palla; I have seen him in very difficult circumstances and I have always found him to be good, always ready to put himself and his money at the service of the cause, friends, or needs, always courageous and first to stand up to danger, always intent on everything his soul, with all his strength dedicated to the triumph of goodness. I have penetrated, by force of intimacy, into the depths of his somewhat wild character, and I have seen an immense love for men, a strong faith in goodness, a firm decision to consecrate his life to the triumph of his idea, and I saw with emotion how these apostolic qualities were harmoniously united with the deep affection he felt for his mother, whom he often remembered, and whose memory filled his blue eyes with tears.”

The White Cross had divided Naples into twelve sections; according to Luigi Fabbri, Malatesta and his comrades took on responsibility for organizing one of these sections. Fabbri asserts that the cholera patients in this section had the highest recovery rate in all Naples, because Malatesta—having grown up in Naples and being on intimate terms with the most militant elements of the local workers' movement—was particularly well-equipped to strong-arm the city government into turning over food and medicine, which the anarchists distributed to those in need.

We can catch glimpses of the anarchists' experience in Naples in the reports from Italy that appeared in the Swiss anarchist periodical *le Révolté* between September and December 1884:

“Cholera has also made its fatal appearance in Italy and, at this hour, it harvests many victims, naturally among proletarian families who cannot afford the luxury of hygiene, for the simple reason that it is a privilege that only the bourgeoisie possesses, like all the others.”

—*le Révolté*, September 14, 1884

“In writing these few lines, I want to offer a fitting tribute of solidarity to our comrade Rocco Lombardo from Genoa.

“A charming young man, barely 27 years old, bold and generous, he was one of the most devoted and intelligent among the revolutionary anarchists of Genoa. He dedicated all his strength and all his thoughts to our cause—that a revolutionary movement took place, wherever it might be, to be sure that it was arranged in the proper way, as his aspirations and his tireless devotion called for.

An opportunity presented itself; cholera was in Naples and reaped many victims from among his proletarian brothers, he joined with other companions and left from Milan, where he was, to go into the heart of the danger.

As soon as he arrived in Naples, he was one of those most noted for his courage and selflessness in helping the victims of the terrible plague. Struck by illness himself, this modest hero of sacrifice died on September 18.

Lombardo was a staunch propagandist. Last year, in Turin, he had founded the newspaper *Proxinzus Taus*, which he supported with his companions until the last moment by means of all the sacrifices of which he was capable. This newspaper sustained fire until its last cartridge, remaining on the breach for several months.

Poor Rocco, you died without having a friend near you to pay you a just tribute of solidarity. We are sending it to you today on your grave, we are making the commitment to defend these ideas that were so dear to you and to sacrifice ourselves as you did for the Social Revolution.

—“*Révolté*,” September 28, 1884

“We receive from our friends in Milan a protest against the slanders that the clerical and bourgeois press heaps upon the anarchists, and in particular companion Rocco Lombardo, whose death we announced in our last issue. Comrades, it's useless to waste time refuting the calumnies of these puppets. Just give them a kick somewhere when you meet them...”

—“*Révolté*,” October 25, 1884

“In Naples, as you know, cholera has wreaked havoc among the workers. There could be no clearer proof of the inequity of today’s society. Our friends who went during the epidemic to treat the sick have just published a manifesto in which they have exposed the real cause of cholera—poverty; and indicated the only remedy—the Social Revolution.

“The newspapers here were scandalized, naturally, and a clerical newspaper did not fail to invoke the wrath of the police against these implacable anarchists, who refuse to permit the people to die in peace.”

—“Révolté,” December 7, 1884

Unfortunately, to our knowledge, no one has been able to turn up the manifesto referenced in the December 7 issue.

Victory over the Plague?

The White Cross officially disbanded on September 26, announcing that the crisis had passed to such an extent that the municipal authorities were once again able to handle the epidemic on their own. Presumably the workers’ associations continued to maintain their own mutual aid efforts, just as they had before the appearance of the White Cross. Thanks in part to their efforts, deaths dropped significantly in October, and the epidemic was officially over by early November. The grassroots mobilization had not defeated cholera singlehandedly—but it had accomplished something that the state could not, helping thousands of poor people to survive the catastrophe. Above all, it had demonstrated that the best aid programs are the ones initiated by those in need, enabling them to define for themselves what their needs and priorities are.

Malatesta was offered an official award in recognition of his efforts. He refused it. The same state that was trying to reward him for what he had done in Naples was also waiting to imprison him for things he had not done in Florence. Besides, he did not wish to be a leader—just a comrade among comrades.

If it is true, as Fabbri says, that the poor Neapolitians in the section of Naples that Malatesta helped to organize had the highest survival rate—not because of Malatesta’s medical prowess, but because of the leverage the anarchists were able to bring to bear on the government to force it to turn over hoarded resources—this bears out the claim that “the true cause of cholera was poverty.” In *Naples in the Time of Cholera*, historian Frank Snowden argues that poverty was a major cause of the 1884 epidemic in Naples: “Cholera thrives on poverty because the poor, through malnutrition and intestinal disorders, are predisposed to contracting the disease.”

The chief solution for cholera, as we now know, is to put a clean water supply at everyone’s disposal. Plumbers, not doctors, are the heroes of that story. But—as repeated cholera outbreaks in Naples and elsewhere throughout the 20th and even 21st centuries demonstrated—kings, capitalists, and presidents alike will all keep some portion of the population languishing in perilous conditions unless collective solidarity and uncompromising rebellion force them to share the resources they try to hoard.

To quote the missing manifesto, **the true medicine to prevent the return of cholera can be nothing less than social revolution.**

Afterwards

That fall, after returning to Florence, Malatesta managed to dodge the prison sentence hanging over his head by escaping from Italy concealed in a box of sewing machines. For the next half century, he continued organizing and writing, leaving his mark on the anarchist movement on three continents.

In his writing, he repeatedly drew on his experience with cholera, using it to illustrate how the fates of human beings on opposite sides of the globe are inextricably linked—a point that the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated to us once again today—and emphasizing that the state itself cannot foster health, only hinder doctors from preserving it.

We conclude with a few selections from his work.

“The inhabitant of Naples is as concerned in the improvement to the living conditions of the people inhabiting the banks of the Ganges from whence cholera comes to him, as he is in the drainage of the port warehouses of his own city. The wellbeing, the freedom, and the future of a highlander lost among the gorges of the Apennines are dependent not only on the conditions of prosperity or of poverty of the inhabitants of his village and on the general condition of the Italian people, but also on workers’ conditions in America or Australia, on the discovery made by a Swedish scientist [Malatesta likely had in mind Alfred Nobel, who had invented dynamite in 1866—an important event in the development of anarchism], on the state of mind and material conditions of the Chinese, on there being war or peace in Africa; in other words, on all the circumstances large and small which anywhere in the world are acting on a human being.”

—Errico Malatesta, “Anarchy”

“Those in government office, taken out of their former social position, primarily concerned in retaining power, lose all power to act spontaneously, and become only an obstacle to the free action of others...”

“With the abolition of this negative potency constituting government, society will become that which it can be, with the given forces and capabilities of the moment...”

“If there are doctors and teachers of hygiene, they will organize themselves for the service of health. And if there are none, a government cannot create them; all that it can do is to discredit them in the eyes of the people—who are inclined to entertain suspicions, sometimes only too well founded, with regard to every thing which is imposed upon them—and cause them to be massacred as poisoners when they visit people struck by cholera.”

—Errico Malatesta, “Anarchy”

“Do not ask, a comrade said, what we should substitute for cholera. It is an evil, and evil has to be eliminated, not replaced. This is true. But the trouble is that cholera persists and returns unless conditions of improved hygiene have replaced those that first allowed the disease to gain a foothold and spread.”

—Errico Malatesta, “Demoliamo. E poi?” *Pensiero e Volontà* (Rome) 3, no. 10 (June 16, 1926).

Appendix: Additional References

The Origins of Socialism in Napoli by Nunzio Dell’Erba and *Italian Anarchism, 1864–1892* by Nunzio Pernicone both offer short accounts of the anarchist mobilization in response to the epidemic in Naples. Pernicone’s book is available in English, published by AK Press. Here is the relevant material from Nunzio Dell’Erba’s book in rough English:

In the months of August and September [1884], there was an intense participation of the anarchists from all over Italy in efforts of generosity and assistance to the Neapolitan populations affected by cholera.

On September 13, Luigia Minguzzi, Pezzi, Malatesta, Arturo Feroci, Galileo Palla, Giuseppe Cioci and Pietro Vinci left for Naples; in the same period, Cavallotti, Musini, [ex-anarchist politician Andrea] Costa, and others went there. The socialists of Ravenna sent their wishes that the proletarians of the Mezzogiorno [the south of Italy] would “soon, immediately free themselves from choleric contagion, as one day (they will free themselves) from bourgeois contagion, which kills like any disease.”⁴ At the solidarity demonstration of the socialists of Ravenna, the lively and powerful voices of the socialists of Parma, Bologna, Lugo, Turin, Alessandria, Genoa, and Milan joined together in protest against the “sorcerer” [Prime Minister Agostino] Depretis and to assist their fellows of the Mezzogiorno.

Towards the end of September 1884, three of these, the lithographer Rocco Lombardo of the Milanese anarchist group, Massimiliano Boschi of the Association ‘The Rights of Humanity’ of Parma, and Antonio Valdrè of Castelbolognese, became victims of the epidemic.

Cholera exacerbated the already sad conditions of the proletariat by forcing bosses to fire their workers or shopkeepers to close their shops, as occurred in the case of the “union of shoemakers” which involved about 400 members. But, as Carlo Gardelli, a socialist from Romagna who moved to Naples, recalled, cholera “has not only caused serious material damage, but has caused other forms of harm, immensely greater, in the moral field.”⁵

⁴ *Partenza di socialini per Napoli*, in “Il Comune” (Organo del Partito Socialista Rivoluzionario italiano), Ravenna, 20–21 dicembre 1884, a. 11, n. 50

⁵ See the letter by Carlo Lardelli, Naples, December 1, 1884, in “Il Commune”, a. II, December 7–8, 1884, n. 59. “The priest knew how to seize the sad occasion and exploit it to his advantage; he knew, in his misfortune, the weakness of the populace and profited from it. Today he is the master of the field. The doors of the houses are covered with writings still entreating God and the Virgin Mary for liberation from the scourge, the walls are once again smeared with images, as they were under the Bourbon domination. There is no more faith in science and the labor of humanity. More hope is invested in a sprinkle of holy water than in any medicine.”

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