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A New Beginning for Russian Anarchism?

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It was only natural that anarchism would reappear in this country where the state has played such an omnipresent role in social life. The role that the state has played in usurping other forms of organisation has led people growing up in this society and those who visit it to contemplate the mechanisms of the state. Negative judgements of these mechanisms are usually formed, so of course some people would come to realise that the state cannot be reformed.

Even though a disproportionate amount of classical anarchist theorists and figures came from Russia, the movement lived a short life; the anarchist movement per se only really started up shortly before the 1905 revolution and was prematurely executed shortly after the consolidation of Soviet power. After a few years of Stalinism, by 1938 there were no signs of anarchist activity to be found. Still, ideas die hard and the spirit of anarchism was revived in at least a few individuals and small groups after the Thaw.[1] The first

[1] After Stalin died and Kruschev came to power, when the penalties for oppositional activity and the level of surveillance were reduced slightly.

self-proclaimed anarcho-syndicalist group was created in 1958 but it was short-lived, due to the effective work of the KGB.[2] Throughout the '60s, up until the Perestroika period, various groups sprang up now and again, but all were rather small and insignificant.

As one can imagine, the beginning of Perestroika and Glasnost signalled the start of a new era. A new type of movement, referred to as 'the informal movement' would grow and take the place of the dissidents. The informals differed from the previous generation of oppositionists in several vital regards. The dissidents were very few in numbers and lived in their own ghetto, with few supporters amongst the intelligentsia; the informals were much larger in number and found more support in the intelligentsia and elsewhere as political ideas and cultural activity moved out of the dark recesses of society. The informals also worked in a wider range of activity than was possible for the dissidents. They often operated through official organisations, such as ideological, youth and cultural groups and they tried to turn the language of socialist ideology against the Soviet state. It was in the informal movement where the modern Russian anarchist movement took root.

Many of the anarchists who came out of the informal movement started off as critical Marxists. The first members of the Moscow Obschina group met while working in the clandestine Organizing Committee of the All-Union Marxist Workers' Party. Many of these

[2] A group of people from the History Department of Moscow State University began to gather in 1957 and discuss different ideas, among them the ideas of workers' councils and of Bakunin. They formed a clandestine group in Oct. '58 and wrote a program. The group's activities ended in Jan. 1959 when one of its founders, Anatoly Mikhailovich Ivanov, was arrested in the History Library for writing anti-Soviet literature and sent to a psychiatric hospital. He was released in 1960 and people began to gather again. (Some people were poets and some political people so there were two tendencies in their loose group.) Then in 1961, before the Party Congress, three of them, Osipov, Ivanov and Kuznetsov, were arrested for plotting to kill Kruschev. Apparently they had seriously entertained this idea as they believed he would start a large-scale war. None of the three resumed anarchist activities afterwards.

strange alliance between 'left' authoritarian forces and 'right' authoritarian forces, some people wishing to add warm bodies to the count often hang out with not only leftists but fascists. Naturally those people with half a brain have been trying to disown these people from the anarchist movement and the injustice they do to the movement is probably far more grave than anything else.

Slowly but surely a few dozen people are trying to develop their ideas about anarchism and figure out how to organise something. Personal politics are not an issue as yet and this reflects their status in society as a whole, but this will change. Gradually anarchist texts will be translated into Russian and some native works are bound to appear as well. The developmant of an anarchist movement may dependent on what will happen in the near future; threats of a return of wholesale authoritarianism always loom on the horizon and it is unclear whether or not material conditions will improve. Still one thing is clear: we are now laying the foundations for the future.

A number of groups have tried to make contact amongst workers, most notably some Ukrainian anarchists now part of RKAS (the Revolutionary Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists, not to be confused with the Russian group KRAS, the Confederation of Revolutionary Anarcho-Syndicalists). Some people have formed 'unions', but many of these are purely symbolic, usually consisting of two or three people. Obviously, these people are at a loss over what to do. There are no (and have not been) any grassroots movements here, in years, and so everything must be started from scratch.

The anarchists face an uphill battle here. People are very accustomed to having the state handle everything for them and this attitude is antithetical to the anarchists' principles of self organisation. The state also did a good job of destroying most ties people had with each other; community was to extend no further than the nuclear family, a structure which dominates Soviet life and creates various barriers to organisation. (Although few people here realise this.)

Isolated into their minute cubicles, many people have retreated into the home, preferring it to the harsh new world of capitalist Russia. There are no real leftist events, depriving anarchists of one of their traditional grounds for recruiting new people and there is little alternative media so to speak of. (The exception being in Kharbarovsk where local anarchists do a radio show.)

Those problems could be expected and we imagine that they plague people in other parts of the world as well. There are many places in the world that have very weak anarchist movements for much the same reasons; perhaps only the fact that there was Bakunin, Kropotkin and Makhno can explain why a small movement has grown in Russia. There are also problems endemic to the Russian scene. Most people are rather poor and it is difficult to fund activities so some people became rather dependent on fund raising from abroad, often creating mythologies around their groups and engaging in political prostitution. Also, due to the

people were historians and therefore had access to anarchist works that normal people were forbidden to read. They started to publish a samizdat magazine called Obschina (Commune) and eventually established an organisation, the Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists (KAS).

The early post-Perestroika anarchist movement was rather atypical in several aspects. First, it existed in a time where there was an unusually high interest in politics, due partially to the fact that everything was new and that history was being reclaimed from the Ministry of Truth,[3] and partially to the fact that people were hoping for something better to be offered for their future. Second, it was created by people who had no experience of non-governmental organisation from which to draw lessons. Third, it was able to attract a rather substantial number of people in a short time; KAS had up to 2,000 members at one point. All of these things however contributed to what many people regard, perhaps inappropriately, as the fall of the Russian anarchist movement.

Interest in politics has waned considerably in the past decade. Partly this can be explained by the deep shock of Dr. Gaidar's therapy and by the fact that happiness is measured in terms of material acquisitions now more than ever before. Also, the novelty of pluralism has somewhat worn off, and no grassroots movement ever managed to grow out of the informal movement, essentially leaving the people as disenfranchised from politics and as disillusioned as ever before. The informal anarchists, not quite comprehending what strategies they could work, thought only on a massive scale; no doubt they imagined that the workers could mobilise to take control of their factories on some significant scale and some tried (and succeeded) to get into office at a local level, hoping to effect some pro-worker legislation no doubt. (As for taking control of fac-

[3] An Orwellian reference (1984) to the fact that before Glasnost history could only be written in a way that vindicated the current leadership of the Communist party and its past actions. History was a machine for justifying the party.

tories, it would have been a tall order in a country where people are so used to being ruled but also, the privatizers had something else in mind and apparently their promises of future material wealth held out more promise to workers.)

It is hard to say exactly how many anarchists there are in the former Soviet Union, particularly because there have been too many people and groups that label themselves anarchists but cannot be identified as such by their politics. (Such gross mutant groups, like anarcho- monarchists and anarcho-democrats have existed; they obviously must be dismissed as quacks). Still one can safely estimate the number of people who consciously consider themselves anarchists and who have some contacts with others as 200–300 people.

The largest federations were FRAN (the Federation of Revolutionary Anarchists) and KAS which accounted for about 150 people. This however will probably change since the creation of other organisations — Confederation of Revolutionary Anarcho-Syndicalists (KRAS), which wants to join the International Workers Association (IWA).; the Ukrainian-based, Revolutionary Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists (RKAS), which considers affiliation with the IWA not to be on the agenda right now and the Siberian Confederation of Labour (SKT) which wants to concentrate on creating a syndicalist union and is not interested in taking sides in the conflicts between various sections of the international syndicalist movement. Many smaller groups exist inside and outside of these groups; a typical group may have between 3 and 10 people and like everywhere else, they are connected by their similar ideas on what anarchism is and what needs to be done. There are also a number of individuals around the country who are quite active but belong to no group.

If previously an anarchist could be considered to be a person who read one of the journals, signed up and was a warm body at meetings, nowadays anarchists are forced to take a much more active role. Most of the self-styled leaders who wrote programs

and manifestos in the early days of post-Perestroika anarchism are gone, and although a few individuals have been more active than others in propagandising their ideas, small groups must meet and decide the eternal question: what is to be done? In this regard they are not unlike small groups in other parts of the world, particularly in isolated places with no real contacts with any sort of radical community.

Anarchists have started different projects, with varying degrees of success. In Moscow some anarchists and other sympathetic listeners gather every Thursday to give lectures on various topics, including anarchism and other philosophies. This is very important for people as we lack good books on anarchism in Russian and people need to understand it better. Still, the question then becomes one of how is to conduct these lectures on a larger scale and how to advertise them so that people can show up and listen. And how to attract people when so many are indifferent to politics? Some people wanted to form a cultural centre but the person who found space wants to run things herself. Instead of creating a space for different collectives to use, the space has become a hang out joint, sometimes visited by skinheads and other idiots but occasionally host to some discussion or concert as well. In Tver and Kharbarovsk, concerts are sometimes held and in every city with some anarchist presence you might find a picket now and again.

One thing where anarchists have been somewhat productive is in creating zines[4] and papers, although they are of varied quality. Still this activity is limited as printing costs are prohibitively high and typically people cannot afford to buy them; the publications must be subsidised if they are to have any distribution. At least a dozen come out sporadically, ranging from idiotic movement gossip sheets to larger zines with several interesting articles.

[4] In the west a zine is typically a small circulation, crudely produced magazine distributed through personal contacts and by post rather than through selling in shops or other locations. We presume this is also the meaning here.