

From 'White Terror' To 'Red Terror'

Anarchist Federation of Hungary

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Part I

After the foul memory of the very first communist regime back in 1918 and the “White terror” enforced by regent Horthy’s conservative semi-dictatorship after 1919, revolutionaries in Hungary should logically have turned to anarchism. However, the Hungarian anarchist movement, which played such a heroic part under the German occupation was non-existent before 1944. The cream of the anarchist groups formed in Budapest at the turn of the century had been liquidated, first, by Bela Kun’s Bolsheviks and the remainder by Horthy’s gendarmes. After Horthy took power the country was cut off from virtually any influence that libertarians abroad might have had over people likely to follow them. The complete state control of the life of the mind and the very considerable influence exercised by the Catholic Church over the masses doomed what few members survived from those old anarchist groups; they rallied around the elderly militant Torockoi. Anarchist ideas were utterly unknown to the people: leftist intellectuals latched on to socialist and radical movements instead. There was nothing to presage any resurgence in libertarian activity.

However, come the war against the Soviets, a war into which Hungary was dragged, the Magyar conscience was rattled by political developments and looming catastrophe. A few youngsters aged between 15 and 21 managed to arrive at and articulate anarchist beliefs. Their elders were virtually all stultified by long-time military and nationalistic education. For the newly fledged libertarians, establishing contact with the older militants was all but impossible and their political education was zero. Aside from a few groups active in Budapest, the capital city being the cradle of all intellectual and political life, they survived in isolation, clueless as to what they should be doing.

Not until March 1944 when German troops embarked upon their “friendly” occupation of Hungary did their anarchist consciousness grow and some of them sought to make contact with the resistance that was beginning to organize itself. That resistance encompassed members of the outlawed Christian-Nationalist Smallholders’ Party, whose legendary leader Bajcsy-Zsilinsky was soon arrested and executed, socialists made impotent by internecine squabbles and intrigues dividing them, badly organized liberals, radicals condemned to inactivity by the fact that their leaders were Jews kept under surveillance by the state: the strongest elements in the resistance were the royalist or pro-British nobility, plus the underground Communist Party. The former did most of the fighting against the Germans, were the only ones to sabotage the army and to have effective networks for the rescue of the main targets of persecution — Jews and Polish and French refugees. As for the Communists, they had the slickest organization and the most financial backing: however, they confined themselves to making propaganda, building up an audience within other resistance factions and getting ready to emerge from this period unscathed and, come the liberation, to throw themselves into the fight against other parties that would have been weakened by the losses sustained. The anarchists were not regarded kindly by these resisters. Everybody looked upon them as a present and future danger. Which is why the first libertarian action did not come until June 1944. A small band of anarchist students led by a 15 year old poet of aristocratic origins nicknamed Christ (currently a refugee in France) mounted an attack in a small northern town on a Gestapo premises, hoping to trigger rioting in the town which they had been leafleting for some months past. Due to an unpredictable mishap, this gambit failed. One student was wounded and Christ and one other arrested. After 18 hours of fruitless interrogation, the two detainees were handed over to the Hungarian police. In the prison of the town they

managed to establish a connection to those of their comrades who had given the Germans the slip and from his prison cell Christ drew a plan for a sabotage operation. At the same time as he was being transferred to the notorious political prison in Budapest's Margrit Avenue, his group were setting fire to an army supply depot: this was the group's final operation as it dispersed immediately thereafter.

In the political prison Christ made contact with Aton M, a young Yugoslav arrested during an attack on a military plant on the Hungaro-Yugoslav border, an attack orchestrated by a team of Hungarian and Yugoslav anarchists, which continued its operations right up until the end of the war in the Bacska region in the south. That group, numbering about a hundred members, was certainly the largest in the resistance, apart from the "General de Gorgey" group operating in the Bakony forests. Many sabotage operations and attacks mounted against German and Hungarian troops in Bacska must be chalked up to this group, about which I have never managed to establish detailed information. The Yugoslav and Christ, along with a royalist prisoner, started to organize a prisoner mutiny which failed at the beginning of October: the two anarchists survived thanks to the loyalty of the royalist who was shot.

At the same time, a student, PM (currently a refugee in Italy) managed to set up a quasi-anarchist clan in Budapest; it had support from the communists. Its operations were restricted to distributing leaflets and maintaining liaison between the resistance and the anarchist groups.

Regent Horthy, theoretically in charge despite the presence of German troops, dismissed Szotay's pro-German government that October and appointed a liberal-minded general as prime minister: the latter mounted an anti-German coup on 15 October. The coup attempt was drowned in blood, but a number of political prisoners were freed by it. In the confusion they managed to hide their files, which enabled them to remain at large after the coming to power of the leader of the Hungarian Nazi Party, Szalasi. Christ emerged from prison with an anarchist of Russian extraction, one Alexei Korsakin, who died recently in Paris. They promptly made contact with Torockoi who decided to launch the Hungarian anarchist movement, the only practical component of which was the youth group run by Christ and PM. About ten groups were formed immediately, each ten to fifteen members strong. Soon attacks were being organized against Nazi depots in the suburbs. In just two weeks, these groups carried out 9 attacks, the upshot being the destruction of three military vehicles and an army telegraph post wiped out in Vecses in the northern suburbs, four Nazi soldiers killed and a battery attacked. Not to mention the cutting of telephone wires, distribution of leaflets, streets strewn with scrap metal causing considerable damage. The capital was turned upside down and there was chaos at that point. US aircraft were relentlessly bombing the centres of industry. German, Hungarian, Italian and Romanian troops were seen parading through the streets. The black market and smuggling reached into every area. The Danube swept south with the corpses of Jews and resisters executed under cover of dark on the quayside in front of the Swedish Consulate which issued diplomatic protection certificates to victims of persecution (the consul, Raoul Wallenberg, who rescued 10,000 Jews, was murdered by Russian troops after the liberation). Crowds of people wearing huge yellow stars on their chests would queue between 5 o'clock and 6 o'clock, this being the time when Jews had permission to step outside the newly founded ghetto. The bloodied corpses of executed resisters were often left exposed in the city squares all day long. And from time to time young men could be seen in the city wearing the [Hungarian] Nazi symbol, the Arrow Cross, but also with broad red scarves worn around their waists: these were anarchist militants, aping Alexei Korsakin's legendary red sash. Their worst enemies were the green-shirted Nazis, members of the militia displaying the

death's head emblem, the SS and the fanatics from the Youth Army which had taken over from the partly mobilized police force at the time in their khaki uniforms and black ties. In the resistance the fellows in the red sashes were beginning to acquire an almost legendary status, which was not at all to the liking of the Communists who claimed with barely disguised impertinence to be the leaders of the resistance. At the second get-together of the Anarchist Movement, held in the barn attached to a house I used to live in, PM informed us of a number of conditions upon which the Communists were insisting in spite of the pact between us: the anarchists were to perform sentry duties and work in the Communists' clandestine presses, and distribute a given number of Communist tracts. And to worm their way into resistance groups and furnish the Communists with any intelligence they gathered. After a 5 hour debate, those proposals were rejected. The response of the Communists was not long in coming: on 7 December, 26 anarchist militants were rounded up by the police, followed after 2 days by a further 41, including PM, the only person who might have pinpointed who had betrayed us. PM's group, the only group untouched along with the group known as the Sz.F, of Libertarian Youth, and led by Christ, then split: one third stuck with us, the remainder joining the Communist Party. Torockoi, approaching his 80th birthday, promptly handed over the leadership of the movement to Christ and Korsakin: the mangled anarchist movement responded with a formidable effort: agitation by Korsakin triggered a riot in the central district of Budapest and this was the only popular uprising of the resistance period as reported, by the way, by all the Allied radio stations. Radio Moscow passed it off as a Communist operation. A small crowd led by anarchist militants, displaying their red sashes to the people for the very first time, overran two units of the Hungarian river navy, moored on the Danube in the very heart of the city. One of those boats was the personal property of the head of state. It was set on fire and the other half-wrecked. This operation was so unprecedented that the authorities made no arrests. The next night, the Sz.F group slipped into the catacombs located under the fort and the royal palace on the small Varhegy hill and blew up one of the munitions dumps that the Germans had installed there. The Movement's newly reorganised third and final team was captured and shot while mounting an attack on a Nazi Party residence. The movement found itself reduced to about twenty militants and bereft of support. The munitions seized by the Sz.F group before they blew up the dump in the catacombs were quickly used up in a number of more conventional attacks in the suburbs and during one operation that destroyed a small railway bridge in Kispest. Now, Christ had for some time been in touch with a resistance group run by the anti-Nazi nobility. It was decided that an alliance with them was the best course. In spite of the differences in their motivations and political outlooks, there was perfect harmony between that group and us and I cannot but pay tribute to the two officers who, in the wake of the liberation, were as decent as political adversaries as they had been brothers-in-arms. One of them died recently while a deportee in Russia and the other has fled to South America. Displaying heroic courage, they saved the lives of five anarchist comrades arrested by Hungarian troops: the two officers immediately hotfooted it to the barracks where our comrades were under interrogation, at extreme risk to themselves, and passed themselves off as military police personnel and took charge of transferring the prisoners to the political prison. The ploy succeeded.

At this point we decided to save our strength for the political struggle that we could anticipate was coming in the wake of liberation. Alexei Korsakin was alone in voting against this decision. In the two weeks left before the start of the battle for Budapest, anarchist militants carried on playing their part in attacks on German vehicles but tended to act in support of the operations of a group to which we had ties, the chief interest of which was in counterfeiting documents for

victims of persecution and distribution of captured weapons around the resistance groups within the army.

Part II

The battle for Budapest lasted 6 weeks. During the siege of the city and in the immediate wake of the liberation it was virtually impossible to keep in contact with the comrades. I think, though, that I am correct in saying that the personal activity of militants was not without merit while the battle raged and afterwards, when the volunteer labour brigades were burning the corpses of the 200,000 victims of the battle on the streets so as to spare the population the effects of plague, when thousands were still dying of starvation and at the hands of drunken Russian soldiers roaming the streets at will and murdering, without a second thought, those who resisted the continuous looting; this at a time when people were so wretched that a rat was worth 10 pengos. Two months before this, that rat might have fed a family for a day when there was not a loaf of bread to be had. But the cabarets and night clubs were starting to open up again in what few unscathed houses remained, for the entertainment of the knights of the black market and the new political masters. At a time when a starving, wretched populace was eking out a living in homes reduced to rubble and where women could be seen fighting with members of the labour brigades because they insisted, despite the ban, on trying to cut a hunk of flesh from some half-decomposed horse. When in the makeshift hospitals doctors were carrying out operations using kitchen knives and when 10 year old girls were dying there from the effects of rape; when a family with no dead members could be regarded as miraculous; when new and unknown faces were worming their way into civil service offices and ex-Nazis were swapping their Arrow cross insignia for the red star of the Communist Party, the only party that would look twice at them; back in those terrible times in the spring of 1945 the services that the anarchists rendered the people were indeed very considerable. The men in the red sashes popped up in the work details, in the hospitals, anywhere where they might be useful. The crash course that Korsakin had given them in the fight against the Nazis had put down roots.

When, in July 1945, Torockoi, who thought that the time had come for him to put his political gifts to work, reassembled the militants of the Hungarian Anarchist Movement, there were only 35 of us: only 2 comrades had survived from the 7 and 9 December 1944 round-up. One of them (PM) finally revealed to us the name of the Communist traitor. We discovered that a short time after blowing the whistle on the anarchist movement, the traitor himself had been arrested and executed by the Germans. Right from the very first gathering, three groups emerged within the ranks of the movement: like him, the comrades surrounding Torockoi were eager to see the movement legalized. PM was the rallying point for those who would rather work in concert with the Communists in the hope of redirecting that party once the bourgeoisie had been overthrown. The third and last group, led by Korsakin, supported by Christ, wanted to carry on the fight and resistance, the main targets this time being the state and the Russian army of occupation...

At this point a coalition government backed by the four "democratic" parties (Smallholders, Communists, Socialists and Peasants) was carrying out the first nationalisations, redistributing the land and overhauling the civil service. But under cover of this relative liberalisation, and social progress, the powers of a wholly Communist political police were looming. With the help of the occupying power that increasingly was the actual ruler of the country, the chief of the se-

cret police, the notorious Gabor Peter, was executed three years later as a Titoist. In view of the heavy losses sustained by the movement plus the over-riding dangers attendant upon taking on the secret police with their spies everywhere, crushing their foes ruthlessly, [he] sought to find some space that might afford some relief to militants worn out from fatigue. He also hoped that, with some sort of above ground propaganda activity, the Anarchist Movement might become a rallying point for a rather sizeable chunk of the population and be in a position to try to establish a political situation that might facilitate the movement's aim of social revolution. Although leftists were calling the reforms implemented since the liberation the "bloodless revolution", it was becoming apparent to us — and this is something that all revolutionaries around the globe need to grasp — that the Stalinists had betrayed the worldwide revolution of the proletariat. PM "quasi-communists" were hoping to acquire considerable influence inside the CP in order to steer it away from Stalinism. The third faction rejected all compromise. But given the material weakness of the Movement, each group stated that it would stand by the group whose approach would secure majority support.

Thanks to his prestige as well as to the diminishing gusto apparent among the militants (remember that most of them were men who had yet to reach their twenties, had been fighting and working without respite for the previous year and were malnourished, to boot) Torockoi carried the day. He immediately applied to have the Anarchist Movement legalised and formally constituted. This was granted. Then permission was withdrawn on the orders of General Voroshilov, commander-in-chief of the occupation army. In spite of this, Torockoi managed to come to an arrangement with the country's leader whereby no obstacles would be placed in the way of anarchist activity as long as such activity could not be construed as sabotaging government policies. A press was immediately set up and propaganda activity begun. In the factory complex on Csepel island near Budapest the workers, let down by the anti-social performance of their new Communist trade unions, were showing sympathy for the only movement that genuinely represented their interests. Now the Communist Party, defeated in the elections from which the Smallholders emerged with an absolute majority, but growing in strength thanks to Soviet backing, had initially reckoned that the anarchist movement would focus its efforts on bringing down the government (in which the Smallholders had a majority) and undermining the Catholic Church which was turning into the most powerful enemy of the Stalinists. Once the Communist leaders woke up to the danger posed by anarchist competition in the ranks of labour, Gabor Peter turned his militiamen against us. Only a few arrests were made but it was predictable that the entire movement (which had grown to nearly 500 militants by September 1945) would be brought to a standstill, its members forced to hide from the police. Torockoi managed to gather together the leading militants for one last time. He asked Christ to oversee the struggle ahead which was going to be a battle with no quarter asked or given. The very next day, Torockoi was arrested and was never seen again. As in the wake of the German sloop, the anarchists replied by mounting an offensive: as Red troops were parading through the city, four anarchist students opened fire on them from a barn. Three officers and five Red soldiers were killed, before the assailants set their hiding place alight and committed suicide. Only their charred corpses were ever found. In the Csepel plants, anarchists sparked the only strike to occur in Hungary since the liberation: but before it could fully develop, it was snuffed out by Gabor Peter's militia: thirty workers — twenty four of them anarchist militants — were executed on the spot. Christ, still a member of the leadership of the leftwing youth movement, put up a dogged fight against Communist efforts to take over the movement and kicked up a stink: rehearsing to the membership of the move-

ment the activities of their pro-Communist members and members of the Communist leadership (7 out of 11 were Communist), he called for the election of a new leadership plus expulsion of those members bent on shattering the unity of the movement. A split ensued, during which an entire branch of the youth movement withdrew. Christ was arrested, only to be freed by mistake after two days. He was forced to flee into the countryside. Alexei Korsakin was wounded at the same time in a scuffle between the police and the populace. PM withdrew from all political activity: a short while later he absconded from Hungary. The remainder of the Anarchist Movement was mopped up bit by bit. The last three militants — Korsakin, Christ and Christ's comrade, the one who had been arrested along with him by the Germans — met up again two years later in Budapest. By which point the contest over the country's future was between the State and the Church. Was there a place for anarchists in this contest? There was nothing we could do: we were outlaws, wanted by the police who had informers everywhere and we were bereft of all funding. Our former comrades were all gone or had renounced their beliefs and joined the Communist Party (only to be expelled in the first purge). All three militants decided to quit Hungary. Christ was the first to go, crossing the border safe and sound. Korsakin followed after two months. The third comrade was gunned down by police on the border.

I had occasion to speak with Korsakin and Christ in Paris last year. They were eking out the wretched existence of thousands of other political refugees and toying with the idea of getting involved in the French Anarchist Federation. "For the first time in five years I am safe and free", Christ told me. Then, just as two policemen passed nearby, he added: "Comparatively." He had worked in several factories but been driven out of every one on account of his anarchist propaganda among the workers. "I have only one weapon left", he told me. "Literature."

Alexei Korsakin was near to death. Ten years of unrelenting fighting had undermined him physically and he could no longer withstand the deprivation. Psychologically, he was done for. He rambled on for hours about the wretched fate of the workers and peasants of "soviet" Hungary. The people for whom he had fought for ten years, were more exploited, more wretched, more enslaved than during the darkest days of the Horthy dictatorship. Korsakin died in December 1949.

Comrades of France and the world over: pay him the tribute he deserved. And spare a thought sometimes for the hundreds of fallen members of the former Hungarian Anarchist Movement, the men in the red sashes who perished in action against their foes, your foes, the foes of human freedom: reactionaries, Nazis and Stalinists. Let us hope that their deaths may not have been in vain...

G. A.

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