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Review: Anarchist Perspectives in Peace and War, 1900–1918

Anarcho

July 11, 2019

This is the first of a series of four books which aims to outline the range and nature of libertarian organisations and views in the twentieth century. Here the author, A W Zurbrugg, discusses anarchist and syndicalist perspectives on war before and during the First World War and must be congratulated in the breath of material summarised. It is a useful reminder that libertarians were at the centre of the labour movement in much of Europe (Britain and Germany being notable exceptions) and in Latin America at this time, addressing issues with an awareness that they could actually impact on events.

The book is divided into two sections, Peace and War – the former, perhaps unsurprisingly, much longer than the first. It is impressively wide-ranging, discussing Latin America as well as Europe, the Industrial Workers of the World as well as the International Anarchist Congress of 1907. Zurbrugg discusses the main debates within the movement, not least over the attitude to take with regards to syndicalism, as well its relations with the wider socialist and labour movements. He stresses the libertarian aim of encour-

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aging working class self-organisation, solidarity and direct action as the basis for internationalism, contrasting it to rising chauvinism within the parties of the Second International (especially its most powerful section, German Social-Democracy) produced by working within bourgeois institutions. This came to a head in 1914, when the bulk of Marxist Social-Democracy supported their State in the First World War.

The response to the war is discussed in the second part, with Zurbrugg showing that the overwhelming majority of libertarians opposed it as a war between ruling classes over imperialist expansion. Sadly, the CGT in France alone amongst syndicalist unions joined the *Union sacrée* when faced with German invasion and social democratic complaisance. Zurbrugg also notes how Kropotkin and a few of his friends sided with the Allies (including a Tsarist regime Kropotkin had fought for decades!) and how the majority repudiated him.

It is nice to note he discusses an exchange of views in 1905 by Kropotkin and Charles Albert on anti-militarism (34), in which the former sought to explain comments made on rushing to the front if Germany invaded. True, Kropotkin said, but the reporter did not mention the revolution which would break out if such an invasion occurred: he side-stepped the issue by assuming a social revolution would break out, so ensuring defence against Germany was also defence of the revolution (and vice versa). Zurbrugg rightly comments that “Kropotkin did not say what should be done if the strength to launch a social revolution was lacking.” We found out in 1914, when faced with a predictable – and sadly all too plausible – lack of revolt, his sympathies for France (land of revolution), his antipathies towards Germany (Prussian militarism) and somewhat uncritical embrace of national liberation struggles saw him become, as Malatesta cuttingly put it, A “Pro-Government Anarchist.”

May that be a lesson in the flaws of that all-too-common radical position of assuming difficulties away!

So this work usefully summarises a mass of material on many different countries, subjects, organisations and people. While the references utilised are occasionally not complete, there is plenty of works indicated for those interested in future research. Some commentary on the debates can be questioned, usually involving minor quibbles (Zurbrugg seems to be more sympathetic to Monatte than Malatesta and so downplays the correctness of the latter's arguments in 1907). The only statement I really wondered at was this claim:

“Name changes might reflect new circumstances and new perspectives – for example, after the revolutions in Russia organisations designated themselves as ‘anarchist-communist,’ stressing the communism they thought was now being constructed; later as Russia’s communism was seen to be a shame, and came to be equated with Bolshevism, anarchists dropped the ‘communist’ tag.” (3)

While I know that the Glasgow Anarchist Group renamed itself the Glasgow Communist Group in solidarity with the October Revolution, I am not aware of anything similar occurring in Russia. This was because before 1918 and the rename of the Russian *Social Democratic Labour Party (Majority)* to *Communist Party*, only anarchists openly proclaimed a commitment to communism (libertarian, of course). They had done so – in the main – since the 1880s, as Luigi Fabbri noted against Bukharin in his classic critique “Anarchy and ‘Scientific’ Communism” (recently reprinted in *Bloodstained: One Hundred Years of Leninist Counterrevolution* [AK Press 2017]). It should be noted that on many issues – support for the soviets, turning a political revolution into a social revolution, workers control, expropriation, etc. – it was the Russian anarchist-communists who advocated radical measures during the 1905 Revolution while it took 12 years before the Bolsheviks decided to pay lip-service to them.

As such, in 1917 Russian Anarchists – like many others outside the country – thought the Bolsheviks had embraced their ideas and

had no need to change their name. By 1918, most had come to the conclusion that the Bolsheviks were not, in fact, building communism at all but rather *state-capitalism* as argued, for example, in an article by M. Sergven entitled “Paths of Revolution” published on 16 September 1918 in *Vol’nyi Golos Truda* (Paul Avrich (ed.), *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution* [London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1973]). While some anarchists proclaimed their willingness to work with the regime as the lesser evil compared to the Whites, these were generally called “Soviet Anarchists” and even fewer had any illusions that it was progressing towards libertarian communism.

So I am at a loss to know what is meant here. However, the key thing is that this is the only part of the book I have concerns over. Overall, it is an impressive summation of the period, its debates, its movements and its context. Anarchists will find it of interest – and will hopefully learn lessons to increase anarchist influence towards the levels of a century past. The main one, I would suggest, is the need for a practice avenue to express libertarian ideas and show to others their validity and usefulness. A difficult task, yes, but Zurbrugg reminds us that it is not impossible.

As noted, this is the first of four books and will be followed by ones covering 1917–30 (Syndicalism, Revolution and Fascism), 1931–39 (Revolution in Spain) and after the Second World War (which will hopefully also discuss anarchist positions on that war, as many anarchists supported the Allies – even the likes of Rudolf Rocker who opposed the first). In spite of the minor flaws in this work, we should look forward to the rest of the series.

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A W Zurbrugg

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