Rudolf Rocker and the Anarchist Stance on the War

André Prudhommeaux

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When a comrade of Rudolf Rocker's renown and capability solemnly takes responsibility for a stance followed by a far-from-negligible portion of the anarchist movement, it behoves every militant to reassess the matter in the full light of reason and experience. And if he cannot do so at the moment, out of ignorance of the writings or due to the impossibility of getting a clear handle on the situation, he can and should, once that situation has become clear, consider on which the side the mistakes have been, so that welcome lessons for the future can be learnt from this.

In his capacity as editor-in-chief of the newspaper of the Jewish workers in New York (*Freie Arbeiter Shtimme*, is, we believe, a daily with libertarian syndicalist leanings and published in Yiddish), comrade Rocker has wielded and still wields considerable influence over certain segments of the American labour movement; he is seen as a symbol of anarchist integrity and it is therefore accepted readily enough that whatever Rocker endorses is compatible with the purest rigidity of his own doctrine and may be all the more unlikely to appear, in the eyes of a unionized worker, as an opportunistic misrepresentation of proletarian morality. Thus when, back in 1933, Rudolf Rocker explained away the unresisting rout of the German working class (and the 'everyman-for-himself' stance of certain very well-known internationalists who abandoned the archives of the IWA to the enemy by way of a perfectly honourable and rather temporary withdrawal pending Hitlerism's inevitable downfall) and when he fingered the Reichstag arsonist Marinus Van der Lubbe as being wholly to blame for the workers' defeat, his declarations and the man himself met with the warmest of welcomes from the great American democracy, happy to have found him to be a reasonable fellow, whose moral authority might be harnessed in the service of its own interests. Events since have shown that the humble vagabond working-man who resorted to arson to steer the German proletariat away from the ballot-box and urge it by example to resort to decisive, violent action as the only thing then capable of rescuing Germany and Europe from Nazi terror was right and that the elderly philosopher-oracle of the German libertarians was wrong. The watchwords of the communist, socialist and trade union leaderships which, as of one voice, screamed provocation and forbade their troops from having recourse to arms, and thus left Hitler free to use them from a position of power, was the real betrayal: the German proletariat's organizational discipline – it had the numbers and the economic strength and a choice of weaponry, but let itself be led into the March plebiscites like sheep to the slaughter beneath

the banners of Hindenburg and Thaelmann, leaving the stormtroopers masters of the streets – remains working class Germany's sin and the world has not yet finished paying for it. By taking fright at the arson attack on a dump full of acrobats where the pitiful farce of German parliamentarism ended in pathetic grimaces under fascism's iron heel, the workers of Germany and Europe finished up being subject to torment and death as whole cities – Coventry, Rotterdam, Warsaw, Hamburg and Berlin – went up in flames, their annihilation the price of the panicky pedantry of a few high priests. The only one to emerge from this ordeal with any honour was Van der Lubbe himself, who was vilified, tortured, drugged, and executed without ever for one second denying the charges or allowing one single "accomplice" to be convicted: true, his sacrifice failed to rally the toiling masses and steer them to victory. Which would have come without him and in spite of him. But he at least had fought back, whereas other victims of Hitlerism were content to grin and bear it: among the many martyrs, he stands as the only hero.

We hope that, having registered how inane his outlook was – "*Hitler falling like a ripened fruit after a few months in power*" – and having witnessed the collapse at the Nuremburg trials of the lies about *provocation* – Van der Lubbe having been written off as a provocateur – comrade Rocker will have the decency to admit his mistake, the way the main champions of the 1936-1938 partnership in government entered into in the name of the CNT and FAI have acknowledged theirs. In my view, those two mistakes derive, not from any deliberate abandonment of anarchist solidarity but from the misreading of an anarchist rule of thumb that admits of no derogation, no matter how exceptional the circumstances (and all the more in exceptional circumstances). I refer to the principle of direct action.

And it is again in the name of that principle of direct action that I wish here to comment upon Rocker's famed article: "The Order of the Hour"[1]:

Comrade Rocker penned that article at a time when the issue of entry into the war on the side of England and Russia was being decided in the United States. We know that American capitalism had long since been split into two almost equal factions: the Isolationists supporting a 'wait-and-see' policy, and the Interventionists who reckoned that the time had come to cut ties with Germany. While waiting for these gentlemen to come to their decision, the majority of American anarchists – following in the footsteps of comrade Marcus Graham, publisher of the review *Man!*, shut down previous year by the government – kept to the terrain of uncompromising class struggle and defence of individual rights. Albeit that he does not specify this, it is to those comrades that Rocker addresses the criticisms he expresses regarding those who "whilst claiming indifference as to who will win in this horrific clash […] make themselves the accomplices of murderous cowards and prepare the world for *the blessings of Hitler's New Order*."

Actually, what is he getting at here? Hopes vested in the success of the capitalist democracies and Russian totalitarianism? Anarchists long ago left the ranks of those lighting candles in the churches. What Rocker is actually asking the American anarchists to do is to take a hand in the class politics of American capitalism and its government in favour of United States *intervention* in the world war. Which – note this – amounts to a two-pronged intervention.

It amounts to *pushing* Wall Street's politicians and those elsewhere to *push* American workers and farmers in soldiers' uniforms into the slaughter in Europe. Now, that is a responsibility that

[1] **KSL note:** "The Order of the Hour" appeared in the *Freie Arbeiter Shtimme* on 28 November 1941 and was reprinted in *Marcus Graham's tissues in the present war: A protest* (London: Worker's Friend, 1944). See the catalogue record at CIRA (Lausanne): https://www.cira.ch/catalogue/index.php?lvl=notice_display&id=1358

it is not for any anarchist to take on, no matter how fervently he may *yearn for* the defeat of Hitler and deliverance of the occupied peoples.

Rocker argues that democratic rights are worth defending and that their abolition would represent a mortal blow to human progress: but at the same time, he asks American anarchists to defer to the suspension of their newspapers, the persecution of their militants, and that they withdraw from the class struggle – in short, that they fall silent. Or rather, he asks them to speak up, write and demonstrate, but *in favour of* the militarization of the country and in favour of a ban on strikes (which, he contends, "sapped French resistance to the Hitlerite hordes"), and above all, *in favour of* dispatching huge amounts of cannon-fodder to Europe in the shape of the "government issue" (in short, GIs) dispatched to international slaughter.

If anarchists start – even if only on paper – managing the lives of the masses and their most sacred interests for war purposes – by calling upon governments to mobilize and preaching meek compliance with its orders, who will be left to directly and in action champion democracy and the rights of the human being? And by what right, once the war has been brought to a victorious conclusion, might it dare preach revolt to those same masses along with that assumption of control of one's own destiny that makes a man a free person?

If anarchists do not cling to their political virginity vis à vis militarism, imperialism, warmongering totalitarianism and the mutual slaughter of proletarians – who will? If, being relatively impotent by virtue of their small numbers, they do not at least cling, come hell or high water, to the revolutionary integrity that they have, for what it is worth, maintained for almost a hundred and fifty years, and which, despite the treachery of their leaders and the collapse of all the mass proletarian parties has earned them and earns them still the respect of the people and the hate of all in authority – who is then going to pay them any heed?

The battle that was joined thirty-two years ago between competing imperialisms is still ongoing on the world stage today. Had we had huge masses at our disposal, we might have spared humanity that ordeal: and if we had such strength today we might, through our direct action, boost it and afford it a direction that might alter its character – and turn it into a liberating revolution, doing away with all borders and every social injustice and lay the foundations of a brand-new world of peace and freedom. The present does not belong to us, other than in the minor acts of resistance in which the survival of grand ideal is asserted. It is in the future that our role will be immeasurable: we will not sacrifice that for the sake of petty outcomes which, on their own, would alter neither the nature of imperialist conflict nor its outcome.

The only form of armed action that anarchists can countenance is insurrection, meaning struggle in freedom, through freedom and for freedom. On that score, anarchists have always been individually and collectively in the lists, in the ranks of the oppressed and against the oppressors. In capitalist imperialism's two world wars, all of the revolutionary intervals, in Russia, Central Europe, in Spain and, more recently, in the countries revolting against German occupation, have been anarchist in character and had a more or less pronounced anarchist involvement. As for their efforts to resist foreign occupation, sabotage industry, and combat collaborationist governments, conduct revolutionary guerrilla wars and fraternization, the French anarchists, on the whole, have behaved in such a way as to require no lessons from Rudolf Rocker. And should the latter persist in upbraiding them for having weakened the military potency of capitalist France between '36 and '39, due to an "unduly narrow" attachment to the interests of the working class, their retort to him might be that class consciousness and class struggle, eradicated from Germany,

Russia, the Far East and in most of the western countries (France not excepted), had to live on elsewhere.

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