

# The Group “Neither East Nor West-NYC” as in Part de Facto Anarchist Black Cross History

The years 1980 to Spring 1994

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## Prologue

(dated history—written awhile ago for that time period—maybe 1994?—and lengthened /updated bit by bit maybe two dozen times—ugh. But the history of the first version and this one remains, in its essentials, unchanged. it was approved by the group aside from my small tangent on the Asiatic mode of production/Oriental despotism re Communism.)

A tweak is needed in this article as special mention should go to the U.S. anarcho-syndicalist Workers Solidarity Alliance (which I’m also a member of) who were major players in NYC-Neither East Nor West (special thanks to Mitch Miller and Steve Rabinowitz). the WSA was a major player alongside us in anti-Soviet-type work in NY. we were the premier people who put anti-Leninist thought into practice- successfully!

The same should be said about the (now defunct) Revolutionary Socialist League (special thanks to Billy Holliday, Chris Hobson), which was a wonderful group of humane and sane leftists. it was me who met them first and introduced them to the anti-authoritarian milieu. I correctly believed that what was in their hearts contradicted their party line. They graduated from an anti-authoritarian take on Trotskyism to anarchism and libertarian socialism and then dissolved. they, too, were major players in NYC-NENW, for instance, giving us the wherewithal to produce some of the *On Gogol Boulevard* (named after a hangout for Moscow’s counterculture, artists, and dissidents) zines (described later). (they were such a cool leftist party—they NEVER tried to recruit any of us—not even me! man, that’s unheard of among leftist parties.)

(Someday I hope to see an @ analysis of the Communist system as modern forms of the Asiatic mode of production (AMP)/Oriental despotisms, i.e., as state despotic collectivism, while wiping out the racist Asian connotation, though these are the historical terms that were used by all the main thinkers way back [including Marx and Engels], and it’s not debatable that many were Asian, the Mid-east included—the ancient Incas being one of many exceptions. I DON’T mean “state-capitalist.” AMP theory is another planet and is highly regarded in the East by even former Communist Party members. China, Russia, the East, were extremely different from Western feudalism. a Russian I met once put it perfectly: she shrugged her shoulders and said, of course Russia was, in part, an AMP and that calling Communism “state capitalist” “trivialized” the horror

and difference of Communism. The anti-Communist sentiment of “state capitalist” theory might be nice on the part of Westerners but is an imperial way of defining the East through a Western lens. capitalism is our problem—don’t graft it onto others who are oppressed differently...)

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There has always been a milieu of anarchists/left-libertarians living outside of the East who have had a special interest in Soviet-type countries. Among this milieu’s interests is in countering the way even many anarchists treat Communism as a secondary concern, if at all. Much of this milieu treats official Communism and Fascism/Nazism as similar twin totalitarianisms, opposing both with equal vehemence, and refusing collaboration with Leninists. The interest is also in part due to the ultra-closed nature of Soviet-type societies and to the lack of info about non-pro-Western activism within them, leaving a gap which we wanted to fill.

This changed in 1980 with the formation of Poland’s Solidarity free trade union. With a nationwide general strike and 10 million workers signing on in two-three months, Solidarity exploded Communism’s frontiers. Neither East Nor West-NYC (NENW-NYC) traces its roots back to this time, when a number of anti-authoritarians in the New York City metropolitan area took advantage of Solidarity’s opening. Individual anarchists and members of the Workers Solidarity Alliance, along with the (now purposely disbanded) anti-authoritarian Revolutionary Socialist League, hooked up while doing Solidarity support. Then in 1983, with Soviet exiles—prominent was *Sergei Batovrin*—this crew and others formed the New York Trust Group (NYTG), a sister group to the Moscow Trust Group (MTG), a semi-above ground and much persecuted anti-nuclear organization. (Following the Moscow lead, other Trust Groups formed in the USSR.) Some in the committee were also members of the New York Anti-Nuclear Group and the Brooklyn Anti-Nuclear Group-BANG, such as myself. These two helped pioneer putting the struggles of the subjugated in the Russian Empire on the antinuclear agenda. The last-named group’s well-circulated and known publication (BANG Notes) was the first ever anti-nuclear periodical in the West to chronicle parallel Eastern scenes.

Being involved with dictatorships automatically brought one into political prisoner support. The NYTG acted in part as a de facto Anarchist Black Cross (ABC) section, as so many of its members were involved in the anarchistic milieu, bringing prisoner activism regarding the East to anarchists. One successful campaign was launched after another against repression of the Trust Groups and in support of their prisoners: petitions, pickets at the USSR consulate in NYC—the works. Others around the U.S. and the world also picked this work up, some forming Trust Groups, many being anarchists (ironically with few or none being officially ABC).

Among NYTG campaigns too numerous to count: Freeing MTG’er Nina Kovalenko from a mental hospital incarceration (where many were tortured and force-drugged, as she was); getting Truster Alexandre Shatravka “paroled” from his seven-year labor camp sentence (an unheard-of precedent-setting victory); springing Yuri Popov of Moscow’s counterculture/pacifistic/anarchistic Free Initiative milieu from a mental hospital; and saving an MTG leader, Nikolai Khramov, from being forced into exile.

The (Soviet)Trust Group wanted “mutual citizens-based campaigns” to link Easterners and Westerners in common effort. Although much of the activity was a one-way street in supporting the Trusters in one human rights emergency after another, the Trusters also supported struggles abroad, for instance, when the MTG protested the jailing of U.S. draft registration resister Andy

Major, or when the Lvov (Ukraine) Trust Group sent a solidarity message to a protest at the Pentagon against U.S. imperialism in Central America (linking it to fighting Soviet imperialism in Afghanistan).

NYTG work culminated on Aug. 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1986: After months of secretive preparation, American members of the NYTG and Brits from U.K. Trustbuilders were accompanied by the MTG in a post-Chernobyl (and symbolically timed for the Aug. 6 anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing) anti-nuclear leafleting at the entrance to Moscow's Gorky Park. We had a sign that said "No more Hiroshimas, No more Chernobyls— Peace and Environmental safety for all". As expected, the team was busted in five minutes and detained by the KGB: Ann-Marie Hendrickson and myself from the NYTG, Peggy Walford and David Barnsdale from the U.K. Trustbuilders, and Nina Kovalenko from the MTG. The action garnered page two and three coverage in major dailies worldwide. One week later, Elizabeth Abrahm and Angela Mugan from the U.K. Greenham Common Women's Peace Encampment repeated the action at the Moscow Zoo, but this time not getting detained (they were surrounded by the militia though). Glasnost was beginning to flower (unknown to many is that it began with Chernobyl), and savage repression against the Trust Group was abating, pretty much ending with the Moscow actions. Sergei Batovrin, its rep abroad in the NYTG, concluded that the special support work could then be brought to rest. (One reason for the "Mission to Moscow" was to solidify the umbrella of protection [in this case, by brave action and publicity] some Western anti-nukers had provided the Trust Groups against the complete annihilation other dissident groups suffered at the hands of the KGB. The MTG took a gamble that if they supported disarmament just as the Soviet state propaganda machine did, then they might survive. And the Western anti-nuke movement, much of which collaborated regularly with the Soviets, was watching, so the Soviets did not want to risk losing some of the members of the movement if the Trusters were smashed. In effect, the Soviets were trapped by the Trust Group—hypocrisy was made plain... The Soviets continued to influence, infiltrate, and create (don't believe it? just google if you're too naive; see "Soviet Peace Committee," etc.) the Western anti-nuke scene, but the Trusters—East and West—put up a stumbling block they would crash on.

The Trust Group work was a resounding success. The MTG formed as a brilliant way to prick open a hole in Soviet despotism by creating a "peace portal," taking advantage of Soviet propagandizing around "peace" the way the West countered with "democracy" propaganda. Though victimized daily (unending surveillance, detentions, house arrest, beatings, torture, two executions...), partly through our help they survived—much to the note and astonishment of Soviet-watchers, the Human Rights establishment, and even themselves...

(During this period we continued our Polish work and were involved, where possible, with other East countries, for instance, in protesting the repression of Czechoslovakia's Charter 77 dissident human rights group.)

Soon after, in the fall of 1986, many of those involved in the above activity, plus others (including New York ABC), formed NENW-NYC to continue the work but solidifying the agenda of mutual solidarity with all the people in the East. That is, not only did we picket for imprisoned Polish conscription resisters, but the Poles were asked, if they could (their conditions being far more repressive), to support struggles here. And yes, they did, for instance, with petitioning in favor of NYC bike messengers fighting an attempted ban of bikes in part of midtown Manhattan. (Both campaigns won!) In the fall of 1987 we published our first issue of *On Gogol Boulevard* (OGB—six to date), chronicling the news of not only the traditional Eastern dissidents, but also

of the newer peace, green, gay, feminist, youth, counterculture, anarchist, democratic socialist and other oppositions. Political prisoner news was right up front, with a number of OGB's having a section on repression and political prisoners in the U.S., bringing Easterners a trustworthy source (anti-Communist, giving us credibility) of anti-Western info. OGB was a networking tool (providing contacts, names, addresses, phone numbers, languages spoken, etc.) for alternative oppositions in East and West. It was an immediate hit—nothing like it was being published anywhere else.

As in the case of the Trust Group, other NENW groups sprang up. Prominent among them in North America were: TorontoNENW, Bay Area, CA-NENW, Lawrence, KS NENW, Albany, NY-NENW, Latin America/Miami, FL-NENW, Mexico CityNENW, Chicago-NENW, and others. We formed the North American East/West Network of almost 40 groups and networked with contacts around the world, many, of course, in the East, some of whom by this time were openly identifying themselves as anarchist. OGB was the chief means of communication and networking among these groups.

Again, NENW-NYC's (and others') campaigns against repression and for political prisoners are too numerous to list. To name a few:

In coordination with Moscow's Free Initiative, the twinning of Soviet prisoner Sergei Troyanski of the Free Initiative and U.S. prisoner Rainbow Hawk of the Rainbow Family, both busted on fraudulent drug charges in politicized trials involving their peace/counterculture/anarchist activism. Both were freed.

We (and others) petitioned and picketed in support of Polish anti-authoritarians in the Polish Socialist Party (Democratic Revolution) and anarchists in Poland's Freedom and Peace group who were denied passports and freedom of travel. All were given passports.

In pre-revolution East Germany, a number of leading anti-authoritarian leftists were arrested. We (and others) immediately picketed local East German consulates. All the East Germans were quickly released and expelled to the West, but were allowed to come home after a short time—another precedent-setting victory. And we got one of them—Wolfgang Templin—to come to NYC to make the rounds, give talks, etc., and see the real America.

We and the Workers Solidarity Alliance went outside of the East and conducted a large worldwide campaign for the release of four political prisoners of Nigeria's anarchist Awareness League: Udemba Chuks, Garba Adu, Kingsly Etioni, and James Ndubuisi. The four were let out on bail—the first prisoners to be allowed bail under the emergency decree they were arrested under (yes, another precedent). That we know of, 59 articles in 16 languages were published on the case, from as far away as Turkey, Estonia, and South Korea and South Africa; over 1400 signatures on petitions from a score of countries were received and over \$1,800 was raised; and there were seven demos at Nigerian consulates on an international day of action, February 22–26, 1993: Moscow, Rio de Janeiro, Dublin, NYC, London, Berlin, and Hamburg, with Norway and Bulgaria lacking targets. The Nigerian state then left them alone.

Prior to the Awareness League campaign, we ran a similar large-scope worldwide protest for NYC's Tompkins Square Park anarchist activist political prisoner Kenny Tolia. (Tompkins Square Park was popular among the homeless and a factor in the gentrification war, the park being closed in a police state atmosphere and the homeless and their squatter supporters being violently ejected in a bloodbath.)

We also had the case of punk promoter Bob Z. Bob wheat-posted flyers for his shows (I was his house poet). But along comes Big Brother, who gives him not one summons but 3000! We

asked the Poles for help with a photo of Bob with a grin and a half, his hands choking with the summonses. The Poles and their Freedom and Peace (*Wolność i Pokój*) group responded with hundreds of signatures on petitions. So I handed them to the judge through radical civil rights attorney Ron Kuby, and the embarrassing case folded. Thank you, Freedom and Peace.

The Russians were freed (thanks in part to the work of the ex-USSR's Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists). But we were asked to do Kenny's campaign too late—after his trial was over (a result of bungling, infighting, and other problems among many in the anarchist scene). He did his minimum eight months, but on daylight work-release, which was a partial victory. At least he had the morale-boosting that at U.S. embassies as far away as Minsk, Warsaw, Mexico City, and Moscow, people were in the streets for him (with the Poles suffering beatings and arrests for their efforts).

Of our political prisoner/anti-repression activity (just part of our work), few have been conducted only by us—one point is to always get others involved. But we often initiate or take the lead in the work, and are the major players.

Smartly done, consistent protest, with planetary coordination, can get the goods. “Neither East Nor West West [NYC] is one of the few anarchist groups who have been around for years, consistently getting results from their actions. They had access to info no one else had and to groups no one else had contact with.” (Love and Rage, “Changes for OGB and ABC,” Feb./Mar. 1993)

NENW-NYC is a specialized de facto ABC group—filling a void—dealing mainly (but not exclusively<sup>1</sup>) with East-West matters. We're stable and larger and busier than ever. We're in the process of initiating a continental network. While we haven't published *On Gogol Boulevard* for a while due to lack of money, it has lived on as a section in many many publications, which we mail to hundreds of our major contacts, mostly Eastern. (Such as the Fifth Estate, Profane Existence, Black Fist, The Shadow and the former RSL's News From the Soviet Bloc in the Torch/La Antorcha.)

For most of our history—with the strong exception of ABC activists in NYC and Toronto, and the ABC affiliated U.S. Bayou La Rose newspaper—we had little or no contact with other ABC groups. ABC, in name, seemed to be a mostly nominal or non-existent affair. It appeared that we and the national and international milieu we were part of were not only de facto ABC, as far as we knew, we were doing the great bulk of ABC-type work around the world. (We now know that the Black Flag paper from England was a regular source of prisoner news, and that International Workers Association sections did prisoner support work, but there was no contact between us.)

Happily, today that's changed. We welcome the renewed formation of organized and coordinated ABC's and will be part of it. Our contacts and resources are open to all.

(As an aside, in non-ABC work, we were the first to have coordinated planetary demos against the West's multinational financial imperial agencies, such as the World Bank and the IMF; our appeal appeared in 16 languages.)

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<sup>1</sup> We use this needed Eastern specialty as a doorway to incorporating (in many concrete ways) the concerns of and making contacts with the “Third World” and the “Fourth World” (land-based Indigenous peoples), with a particular focus on supporting activists with antiauthoritarian and anti-Stalinist perspectives. For instance, we bring to the East such contacts and news of the Third and Fourth world that they would not ordinarily get, such as trustworthy news of the U.S. invasions of Somalia and Haiti. It's done by mailing Easterners anarchist and other anti-U.S. publications and literature that report on the South.

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