

On anarchism in the USSR (1921–1979)

Iztok

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Warning

This article was made from documents on anarchism in the USSR published mainly in France: newspaper articles, dissident books, interviews, etc ... It is not based on carefully collected and exhaustive documentation, but on a series information gathered almost by chance, and which I deemed sufficient to write this article. These are just notes, moreover, as these are more of a few special cases and anecdotes published together than a full study using all available sources. In any case, in order to write a true history of Soviet anarchism, the precious documents that must be in the archives of the Tcheka, the GPU, the NKVD and the KGB, and which unfortunately cannot be consulted freely, are lacking in order to write a true history of Soviet anarchism. This incomplete and bastardized article aims to show the continuity of anarchist ideas in the USSR from the crushing of the Revolution to the present day, and to provide those interested in this subject with a starting point for possible research. Indeed, a lot of information is to be confirmed, completed or discovered.

From 1921 to 1937

The definitive crushing of the Russian anarchists is commonly dated 1921. That year, the Makhnovist movement was definitively crushed by the Red Army, and the Commune of Kronstadt, the last burst of spirit of 1917, was drowned in blood by Trotsky et al. Books dealing with anarchism in Russia often stop at this date. But the activity of revolutionary anarchists will continue for a long time to come, although very weak and although it is a rearguard fight (it will often take place in camps and prisons).

Free activity

After 1921, all anarchist propaganda was severely repressed, apart from a few exceptions tolerated by the regime to give itself a “liberal” image: the bookstores and “Golos Trouda” editions of Moscow and Petrograd, the “Black Cross” and the Kropotkin Museum. But there were still a few attempts at clandestine activity which would be quickly discovered by the Tcheka. The last traces of underground groups do not go beyond 1925. A few acted in 1922 and 1923 in Petrograd and Moscow. In 1924 another fairly active anarchist group still existed among the workers in Petrograd, but it was forced to cease its activity when its existence was discovered. Groups existed in several cities of Ukraine and leaflets were distributed; there was also clandestine propaganda carried out among the peasants. In 1924, the “Southern Russian Anarchist Group” sent news to their fellow exiles. This was its only known activity. By 1925, clandestine propaganda was the work of individuals and not of groups. This very weak propaganda seems to have had results. The wave of strikes which rocked Moscow and Petrograd in August and September 1923 was due in large part to the Mensheviks, but in several cases to the anarchists.¹

The official anarchist institutions still had a little legal activity. The “Golos Trouda” editions published the complete works of Bakunin and a book by A. Borovoi on anarchism in Russia. The Kropotkin Museum opened in 1921 in Moscow. An organization, the “Black Cross”, which aimed to help imprisoned anarchists was also tolerated. But if they were maintained, it was because it

¹ *La situation actuelle en Russie, le Groupe d’anarchistes du sud de a Russie, Revue Anarchiste* 1924.
Le mouvement anarchiste russe, J. W., Revue Anarchiste 1925

was in the regime's interest. They existed only in Leningrad and Moscow, windows of the USSR to the rest of the world. In the provinces nothing was possible, anarchist literature tolerated in Moscow was prohibited. The Tcheka then the GPU also found their account there, by identifying more easily the anarchist sympathizers. There were always indicators that the "Black Cross", and all visitors to the Kropotkin Museum, were photographed without their knowledge. But these legal institutions would gradually, with the consolidation of power by Stalin, become useless. The "Black Cross" was dissolved in 1925 and its main leaders were imprisoned. Bookstores in Moscow and Leningrad were closed in 1929 amid a wave of arrests that hit anarchist circles. The Kropotkin Museum closed in 1938, on the death of his widow.²

While legal activity and underground groups disappeared, there were still individual acts. When the Communists exploited the Sacco and Vanzetti affair for their anti-American propaganda, some Russian anarchists denounced this maneuver of a regime which defended two anarchists in order to better intern thousands of others in its camps and prisons. The anarchist Warchavsky was imprisoned because he possessed pamphlets published clandestinely on the occasion of the execution of the two martyrs and which denounced the exploitation of their affair by the Soviet regime. Nicolas Beliaief, an anarchist deported to Turkestan found himself in Siberia for protesting because a military aviation camp in the region had been named after them. There must have been many other individual actions, such as that of Ivan Kologriv, an anarchist docker convicted in 1930 for anti-militarist agitation³

Activity in prisons and camps.

As a result of the repressive system put in place by the Communists, most of the active anarchists found themselves in prison, deportation or relegation. And there they continued to struggle. They participated, along with other socialist currents of the Revolution, including revolutionary socialists and social democrats, in the struggle to retain the advantages of the status of political prisoner inherited from tsarism: no forced labor, free correspondence, free movement in the camp at all hours of the day and night.

From 1921, political prisoners were interned on the Solovki Islands, in the White Sea, where there was a former convent. In December 1923, when the archipelago was cut off from the rest of the world by winter, a few advantages were suppressed: limitation of correspondence and other small things and, above all, a ban on leaving the buildings after 6 o'clock in the evening. In protest, revolutionary socialist and anarchist volunteers went out on the first day after 6 a.m. But even before the curfew time, the soldiers shot at the prisoners outside. There were 6 dead and several injured. But after this "incident", the political regime was maintained. At the end of 1924, new threats weighed on the political status. All political factions agreed again to demand the evacuation of the archipelago before the navigation stopped, otherwise a collective hunger strike would take place. Moscow rejected the ultimatum and the strike began. All able-bodied people took part. Doctors chosen from among the detainees monitored each hunger striker. But the authorities who were indifferent to the strike were content to wait. After 15 days, dissensions were felt because of the large number of participants and the various political currents. A secret ballot voted for an end to the strike. It was not a victory, but it was also not a defeat: the political regime was maintained.

² *La situation actuelle en Russie... The Russian Anarchists*, Paul Avrich.

³ *Le Libertaire*, numéro spécial sur les anarchistes emprisonnés en Russie, février 1931.

In the spring of 1925, the Solovskys were evacuated. In fact, it was a maneuver by the authorities to break down resistance. The elders (prisoners elected by each fraction and responsible for parleying with the authorities) were interned in the Verkhné-Oural'sk isolator. The attacks against their "freedoms" were made more precise: movement between cells was prohibited, the elders were re-elected but they could no longer come into contact with other cells. The struggle continued, but the compartmentalization did not favor it. Around 1928, another hunger strike took place. But the atmosphere was not the same as the previous one, and after a beating of the strikers by the guards, the movement stops.

The last collective hunger strike by Solovskys political prisoners would take place in early January 1937 in the Yaroslavl isolator. The last survivors presented their long-standing demands: election of elders, free movement between cells, etc. After 15 days of strike, they were artificially fed. They got a few benefits that would be taken back from them in a matter of months. It was the last collective manifestation of anarchists, revolutionary socialists and other socialists imprisoned after the revolution. The Stalinist purges would decimate these veterans⁴.

Solidarity was very strong at that time between the anarchists, but also between all socialist political prisoners in general. This long struggle waged collectively for nearly 15 years is proof of this. But there are other cases of mutual aid: for example in Tchimkent, until the early 1930s, the relegated revolutionary socialists, social democrats and anarchists fed a secret mutual aid fund for their comrades in the North. Indeed, if one could easily find work in Chimkent even if one was relegated, this was not the case in North Siberia where many relegated had no means of subsistence⁵.

The Stalinist purges

In 1937–1938, Stalin exterminated all those who participated in the Revolution, Bolsheviks or otherwise. Thousands of people were shot, millions disappeared in camps in Siberia. The anarchists who survived the Revolution were hit hard by this wave of arrests. Famous men like Yartchouk and Archinof were shot, thousands of other unknowns, who had been anarchists before or during the Revolution, were killed or deported to the camps. These purges mark the extermination of the anarchist "old guard".⁶

The memory of some persecuted anarchists at that time has come down to us. The Jewish tailor Aïzenberg for example: an individualist anarchist and disciple of Kropotkin, was arrested in Kharkov in 1937. He resisted the beatings and torture used to make him confess that he belonged to an organization and to denounce its members. He replied that he was an individualist anarchist, and therefore he did not recognize any organization. For 31 days and 31 nights he underwent interrogation interrupted only twice a day to eat. He was 55 years old and he did not give in. His torturers were the first to tire: he was sent to an insane asylum in Moscow.⁷ Also in 1937, the anarchist Dimitry Venediktov, who had been relegated to Tobolsk, was arrested for "spreading rumors about the loans" (they were compulsory state loans) and "dissatisfaction with

⁴ *The Gulag Archipelago*, Alexandre Soljenitsine volume I.
Le Libertaire numéro spécial.

⁵ *The Gulag Archipelago*, volume III.

⁶ *The Russian Anarchists*, Paul Avrich.

⁷ *L'accusé*, A. Weissberg.

the Soviet power”. He was condemned to death and executed.⁸ The purpose of the purges was among other things to liquidate all those who directly or indirectly had a connection with the political currents which took part in the Revolution. Stalin wanted to do away with all those who believed that the Revolution could bring freedom.

From Purges to De-Stalinization.

The purges mark the physical elimination of many anarchists that had participated in the Revolution. Those who were not shot were in the camps, and the few who remained at large dared not do anything. Yet anarchism did not die in the USSR. As early as 1937, there were young people who felt anarchist sympathies after the movement had already been destroyed.⁹ In the Stalinist camps; the only places where anarchist activity was noticeable, there were now, alongside Russian anarchists, Soviet anarchists.

In 1947, in the camps of northern Siberia, there were many soldiers who, taken prisoner by the Germans and freed by the Russian victory, were deported on Stalin’s order. It was in this environment that the “Democratic Movement of Northern Russia” appeared. Supported by non-Stalinist Marxists and by anarchists (one of the slogans of which was “for the Soviets, against the Party”), this movement organized a revolt. It broke out in the Jeleznodorojny camp, and it more or less affected the camps of Promyshleny, Severny, Gornieki and Vorkhoute. Victorious at first, this revolt was eventually crushed by the army, and those who participated were ruthlessly hunted down.¹⁰

The anarchists also took part in the revolts which rocked the camps in 1953–54, after the death of Stalin and the execution of Beria. These camps, dominated by common rights, were gradually taken over by politicians from 1949. On the death of Stalin, when a fraction of the Kremlin with Krushchev played the de-Stalinization card to strengthen its power, the situation was in favor of the outbreak of revolts in the camps. In Norilsk, a camp located in the far north of Siberia, Makhnovists, 30 years after the crushing of their movement, actively participated in the revolt.¹¹

The memory of Makhno did not in fact die in the camps at that time. But Soviet propaganda which equated him with a bandit had achieved its objectives. For some, Makhno was only the leader of a bandit troop.¹² Solzhenitsin cites the Makhnovists as one of the many currents which spread through the underworld interned in the camps in the years 1947–52.¹³

The participation of anarchists in the camp revolts of 1953–54 represented the last known appearance of anarchists who participated in the Revolution. What would be interesting to know was whether the term Makhnovists only covered former members of the Ukrainian insurrectionary army, or if it also included other non-Makhnovist anarchists and/or born after the revolution, because of their common convictions.

⁸ *The Gulag Archipelago*, volume III.

⁹ *The Gulag Archipelago*, volume I.

¹⁰ *Dissenso Est-Oveste*, janvier 1979

¹¹ *L’incervable anarchisme*, L.M. Vega

¹² *Le Blatnoi*, M. Diomine

¹³ *The Gulag Archipelago*, volume III.

From the XXth Congress to 1979

After the “Khrushchev report” a brief period of relative liberalization began in the USSR, a period which saw the emergence of a protest movement whose dissent emerged in a direct line. After more than 30 years of Stalin’s absolute and suffocating dictatorship, there was a great circulation of ideas. “In 1957, in the midst of a period of de-Stalinization, our group, like many others, thought that the authorities, in the face of this kind of Prague Spring, would not dare to intervene. At the time, there was no questioning of communism, but rather an attraction to Yugoslavian democratization. We were people of communist-libertarian tendency only questioning the blindness of the totalitarian state and advocating greater autonomy of the individual in our society. Some of us questioned the state and called ourselves Anarchy. There were also in all these groups people who claimed a harsh nationalism.”¹⁴ said a Jewish emigrant of working-class origin. At the time, he was a student in Leningrad and in 1957 co-founder of a discussion and reflection group. Thus, despite the Stalinist repression, anarchism could not be suppressed and was reappearing outside the camps.

But Khrushchev could not tolerate such a situation for long, and as soon as his power was more stable repression befell all those who did not fall in line. An exiled Russian dissident interned between 1957 and 1965 in concentration camps met several anarchists there during his detention. They were anarchists of the new generation: “They had read the books of Kropotkin, and sometimes of Bakunin (which was very difficult to find in the USSR’s libraries), they were likewise familiar with the ideas of Proudhon and with contemporary western thought.” Thus despite the ideological suffocation of the Soviet regime, ideas still managed to circulate. He also cited the example of a comrade, E., who after spending ten years in the camps, was released in 1971. He was again arrested and convicted in 1974 for the traditional accusation of “anti-Soviet propaganda”. E. declared himself a defender of human rights because openly declaring oneself an anarchist in the USSR was very dangerous.¹⁵

This dissident also met anarchists outside the camps. In 1967, the comrade who had founded the Leningrad think tank was arrested for helping Galanskof, one of the most prominent dissidents of the time; to sell foreign currency. There was also the case of an anarchist dock worker arrested for “anti-Soviet propaganda” among his co-workers. E. Kouznetsov made a study in 1971 on the inmates of the concentration camp where he was at the time. He gave a series of very interesting figures. Thus out of 90 prisoners there were 19 democratic nationalists, 7 internationalist democrats, 6 monarchists and one anarchist; the others had no political opinion.¹⁶

Finally, very recently there was the Leningrad “left opposition” affair. It was a sort of underground left-wing organization that was trying to create itself, and there was an anarchist current.

The Left Opposition

In 1978, a group of students, the “left opposition” appeared in Leningrad. It was created by students who in 1976 had been linked to a case of distributing leaflets against the party on the occasion of the CPSU congress. As a result of this case, a student, Andrei Reznikov, was sentenced

¹⁴ *Marginalité et débordements quotidiens en URSS*, *Matin d’un Blues* N°2 (fin 78, début 79)

¹⁵ *Les anarchistes en URSS*, lettre d’un émigré au CIRA, *Front Libertaire* N°102, janvier 1979

¹⁶ *Marginalité et débordements quotidiens en URSS...*
Journal d’un condamné à mort, E. Kouznetsov

to two years in camp. His friend Alexander Skobov created in June 1978 a commune in Leningrad which was a meeting point for marginalized youth and for supporters of the group. The group also published a review which would have 3 issues during the summer of 78, and which alongside texts and great classics published current theoretical or dissent articles. One of the plans of the “left opposition” was to bring together in a conference left groups from Leningrad, Moscow, the Baltic States, Ukraine and the Caucasus to confront ideas and organize themselves if necessary. The conference scheduled for September was postponed due to the attitude of an “orthodox Marxist” group. The repression that befell the group ultimately prevented this conference from taking place. Delegates were turned away and the Muscovite Bessov was interned for a while. In August, the commune was searched and ransacked, its regulars were followed. Beginning of October; the KGB questioned Skobov, from the 10th onwards numerous searches took place among people close to the community, who were also questioned. On October 14, Skobov was arrested, on the 31st it was the turn of Tsourkov, another active member of the group and veteran of 1976. To protest against these arrests, more than 200 students demonstrated in Kazan square in Leningrad on December 5. Reznikov was attacked in the street by “strangers”, and he was detained several times for a few days. On April 6, 1979, Arkady Tsourkov was sentenced to 5 years of work and 2 years of internal exile. On April 16, Skobov was sentenced to indefinite psychiatric confinement. Alexis Khavine; who refused to testify against his friend Skobov, was accused of drug trafficking and sentenced to 6 years in a camp in August. This systematic repression wiped out the “left opposition” and the Skobov commune.¹⁷

The aim of the group was to confront left-wing ideas in a debate and to create an organization if necessary. Its review, “Perspektivy”, published authors from very different currents: Kropotkin, Bakunin, Trotsky, Marcuse, Cohn-Bendit to provide the bases, there were texts for and against the Kronstadt uprising, texts taken from other samizdats, and issue #3 was composed of programmatic articles to serve as a basis for discussions at the Conference. The review also contained a report on the demonstration of July 4, 1978 in Leningrad which spontaneously brought together 15,000 young people. It was very influential in the student community of Leningrad, and it was diffused in other parts of the USSR. The ideas expressed in #3 can be called “ultra-left”. You had to fight against the Soviet type of state and not against the state in general. The working class was integrating and the only revolutionary class was that of intellectuals and students. There was proof that private agriculture was superior to collectivized agriculture. For some, a fraction of the bureaucracy would play the democratization card to maintain itself, and the most important task was to strengthen the opposition. For others, there would be no democratization, and it would be necessary to use violence and illegality: manufacture of counterfeit money, possibly hostage-taking, armed struggle inspired by “anarchists of Federal Germany, particularly of the Baader-Meinhoff group”, etc. Finally several concrete proposals were given as a program: it ranged from “freedom and autonomy of associations and organizations” to “for national questions, the right to self-determination should be applied” through “liquidation of the conscription army and its replacement by a voluntary army”. All the other proposals were of the same kind and could be qualified as “reformist”.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Les tracts subversifs et la communauté de Skobov, Leningrad : la “grande Maison” entreprend de détruire les communautés and La plate forme de l’opposition de gauche de Vadim Netchaev, libération des 4, 5 et 10 avril 1979.*

¹⁸ *The leftist opposition by Vadim Netchaev, Labour Focus on Eastern Europe, 1979, n°3.* Netchaev’s two articles are quite similar on the course of events, but they complement each other in terms of information on the movement’s program.

But alongside this current represented by these texts, there was a significant anarchist influence. The publication in the journal of Kropotkin and Bakunin is proof of this. In the community library, which was Skobov's, the dissident press, Trotsky, young Marx and Kropotkin were next to each other. Skobov, himself considered one of the theorists of the group, "defined himself as an anarcho-socialist, a supporter of the young Marx. His program included pluralism in the economy; a complete democracy in politics and ideology; pacifism."¹⁹ He belonged with Tsurkov to the nonviolent tendency of the group which he wanted to keep always open: "the other wing of the movement to which Arkady Tsurkov and Alexander Skobov (who are the ones I have known personally) belong." "Stick to non-violent methods regardless of government policy. Its concern is to maintain the open character of the movement and to avoid its premature crystallization and its natural companion, sectarianism."²⁰ Skobov was not the only one to be influenced by anarchist ideas. For example, his friend Alexis Khavine had been convicted in 1977 for having shown works by Kropotkin while he was still a high school student.²¹

Anarchism and the Others

There is no need to use long sentences to convey the position of Soviet power vis-à-vis the anarchists: they are irresponsible and bandits. But on the other hand, it is interesting to see the image of anarchism that dissidents have. In general, and for obvious reasons, little is known about anarchism, especially in its history. This is what Pliouchtch replied in 1976 at a press conference. "To the question 'has the anti-worker massacre in Kronstadt been remembered,' Pliouchtch replied, 'there is nothing left in the memory of the workers, history is entirely falsified.'" So for Makhno "those who told me about him spoke badly to me, but here I realize that he was slandered by the Russian press. Not only did he not make pogroms, but he shot those who did." As for the Spanish anarchists interned in 1939 at the Karaganda camp, he "does not know the details, but was aware of the affair."²² From the point of view of ideas, while some dissidents apparently know them correctly, others, intentionally or not, distort them. For example, in the collective work "Voices under the rubble", one of the articles cites Bakunin, the other Kropotkin. For Igor Shafarevich, Bakunin's only goal was to destroy, he had no positive ideals. On the other hand, Malik Agursky quotes without distorting Kropotkin's conceptions of the association of intellectual work and manual labor in the communities of the future society²³. It should be noted, moreover, that even among those who are influenced by anarchism in the Soviet Union, Kropotkin's thought is much more familiar to them than that of Bakunin. Perhaps this is partly due to the fact that Kropotkin, unlike Bakunin, is also known as a scientist in the USSR. Thus in 1976 the "Bulletin of the Moscow Society on Experimental Nature" published several articles on Kropotkin and his scientific activity where there are no gratuitous attacks on anarchism.²⁴ Finally, the traditional image of the anarchist does not seem very different from that prevalent in France. According

¹⁹ *Les tracts subversifs...*

²⁰ *La plate-forme de l'opposition de gauche...*

²¹ *Labour Focus on eastern Europe*, 1979 n°5

²² *L'URSS en 1976 vue par Pliouchtch*, *le Monde Libertaire* juillet-août 76

²³ *passé et avenir du socialisme*, I. Chafarevitch and *Les systèmes socio-économiques actuels*, M. Agoursky, *des voix sous les décombres*, collectif

²⁴ *Sur le centenaire de la publication d'études sur la période glaciaire*, de Pierre Kropotkine, M. Zemliak, *anarchives* n°1 déc. 79

to Vadim Netchaev, Skobov “looks like he has been snared and searched by cops for anarchist bombs” because he wears a beard and a soldier’s hood.²⁵

So despite more than 60 years of dictatorship, the Soviet regime was unable to completely stifle anarchism. Those who claim to follow libertarian thought today have little in common with the anarchists of 1917. The economic and political situation has fundamentally changed, and their number and influence are infinitely smaller. But there is continuity between these generations despite the violent repression from 1918, despite Stalinism and its purges, despite the difficult circulation of ideas. Anarchist thought is not yet dead in the USSR.

²⁵ *Les tracts subversifs...*

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