

Trotz Allendem

a polemic on guerrilla warfare – excerpts

John Olday

April 10, 1976

The new generation booed Stalinist Bolshevism off the stage while enthusiastically cheering Maoism as the new star of genuine communism. Yet how critical was the inquiring mind of our contemporary Castro-Guevara-and Mao Tse-tung enthusiast?

We do not object if Marxist-Leninists loot anarchist ideological values and incorporate them into their programs, although we would expect at least honest acknowledgement of their source. If Marxists would actually carry out anarchist methods, much the better. What we object to is the opportunistic pretension, the abuse of the libertarian character and the twisting of it into Blanquism.

May we quote at random early anarchist statement that have been made use of in various non-anarchist guerrilla programs.

“The insurgent anarchist is aware that violence stands in contradiction to the ideal. He accepts violence as necessary and as the only way left to bring to an end the endless violence exercised on the part of reactionary regimes.”

“To approve of unlimited violence is absolutely condemnable. The use of violence can only draw its excuse and justification from the argument of the self-evident necessity for self-preservation. The moral responsibility rests with the ruthless oppressors. The counter-violence of the guerrillas is based on the ethical goal, as perceived in vision of a free society. The aim determines the guerrilla’s conduct of his warfare and regulates the grade and nature of the violence he uses.”

“Guerrilla units are not formations of an army. Small groups are kept fragmentary. There is no rigidly fixed organisation. Action leaders have no official status. There is no centralised authority.”

“The guerrilla movement is, in relation to its aims, conduct and formation, anarchist. The groups are autonomous units. They may not even keep in mutual contact.”

“All actions are planned collectively and carried out in mutual agreement, whereby initiative is given free hand, to suit any situation occurring at the moment.”

“The basic antimilitarist character results in a consequent opposition to all socialists’ and communists’ attempts to exploit the guerrilla movement for the construction of a Red Army fundamen-
ment.”

“The ideology of the guerrilla movement accepts no discipline dictated from above and refuses to fight for any revolutionary government or in support of a nationalist liberation because nationalist independence movements harbour the germ of fascism.”

Parties come and go, just as nations in the course of history grow to a point of climax and then decline. Since freedom is the basic universal inclination, the guerrilla fighter, although engaged in local combat, is aware of the international implication. With the universal purpose in mind, he will reject coordination with people who hold views elementarily foreign to the libertarian outlook and instead seek congenial international support, thus warding off the danger of infiltration and subsequent internal disintegration. As long as the guerrilla cherishes his undiluted conception, nothing can go wrong. New fighters will replace those who perish and the everlasting renewed struggle will finally cause the collapse of establishments blocking the road to freedom.

* * *

When the English and German labour movements fell under the spell of Marxist reformism, the Bakuninist section of the 1st International was viciously attacked for their firm advocacy of armed struggle in answer to repression. The Jura anarchists were the first to publish a comprehensive booklet detailing what measures could be employed to defeat any major military operation of a regime attempting to forcibly frustrate a General Strike.

The definition of a General Strike was unmistakably formulated: total participation of all industrial sections of the entire nation. In the case of any trade union branch, under domination of reformist leaders, acting against the workers, the rank-and-file should dispose of the latter and confiscate their strike funds, to be put at the disposal of the General Strike committees. In conformity with the standing anarchist anti-militarist tradition, especially in the Latin countries, sympathetic workers in uniform should intensify their agitation for fraternization, convert their cells into soldier's councils, confiscate regimental funds, arrest officers and distribute arms to the people.

All this was nothing extraordinarily new. But there followed a list of suggestions on practical and simple acts of sabotage, which could be carried out by anyone, man or woman or youth, and if practiced massively, would effectively hamper the mobility of any police or army force and, in combination with guerrilla attacks, achieve the standstill of the military offensive.

As a matter of fact, there isn't a single direction in our contemporary Maoist, Guevarist and Castroite guerrilla manuals, that was not first formulated in the anarchist pamphlet of the last century on General Strike and sabotage.

We do not claim that the anarchists were the sole authors of a summa collection of guerrilla tactics. Long before the runaway gladiator Spartacus employed similar methods. They had been used by rebels all over the Globe. But the Jura anarchists may be credited with having first adjusted the ancient guerrilla strategies to the new situation of industrialised civilisation and not merely bringing them up to date, but supplementing them with a new factor, namely the recruitment of everyone into the struggle against the common enemy. By showing ordinary people what they, on their own part, could do and the enormous effect their simple sabotage actions could have on a supposedly superior and overwhelmingly powerful enemy, the anarchists — at the very least — did their share to fight the defeatism promoted by the Socialdemocrats. It was not the fault of the anarchists that there was no immediate general response and that it took an undue time for their ideas to sink in, after long incubation (and that, under the impact of two world wars, it reappeared in an immature Marxist distortion). Yet where the Bakuninist and Jura formulations were followed, without reform or equivocation (as in isolated instances in Spain

and the Makhnovist Ukraine), the results were explosive and constituted some of the only real attempts at social revolution. And exactly where the formulations were tampered with, lay the root cause of disaster and crushing defeat.

* * *

The deadly danger of German fascism under Hitler was entirely underestimated in Germany and abroad. Most people were convinced that they would have a chance to bargain. Capitalist, middle class, aristocrat and worker alike, were led by false hope of security. By the time they realized that they were cornered, they had no other alternative but to submit or perish, for it was then too late.

How did this come about? — The vitality of the workers had been drained by endless and frustrated legal industrial struggles. They had been discouraged by defeat after defeat. It had been hammered into them that any attempt of armed resistance would be suicidal; that they were no longer a match for the enormously rearmed counterrevolutionary forces. There were still a few anarchists who, throughout the years of postwar and inflation, fiercely exposed the insane policy of the Socialdemocrats and Communists, and although aware of the approaching victory of the national revolution, had at least tried to stem the pessimism of the dispirited workers and to rekindle revolutionary courage, but their call remained a cry in the wilderness. It was all very well to say, ‘inaction is the road to revolutionary impotence’. But the workers had learned by bitter experience that direct action carried out by a minority of militants and meeting with no massive favourable response, was a waste of revolutionary energy. What good would it do to continually point out that the workers are only then powerless when they surrender without a fight...? The workers had fought and they had been crushed.

How did this come about? — Was it because the majority of organised workers still kept allegiance to a corrupt Socialdemocratic party? Because the workers’ councils had been usurped by politicians? Because the revolutionary syndicalists failed to attract a mass following? Because the counterrevolutionists had a superior military force? Because the Communist Party had, by their irresponsible *va-banque* policy disqualified themselves as competent leaders of the revolutionary proletariat and only deepened the general confusion? Or because the anarchists had shown no gift for organising and had attempted to surpass Prussian or Bolshevik methods? No.

In 1918/19 revolutionary units, voluntarily formed at the spur of the moment by deserter soldiers, sailors and workers (and those officers who fraternized with the rebels and were elected council members), were only tolerated by Liebknecht and Luxemburg if they placed themselves under the direction of one of the left-Socialist groups controlled by either of them. A “Red Army” as visualized by Liebknecht and Luxemburg would be under their General Staff direction — and would follow the Trotskyist pattern: a rebel army usurped by the Party, purged of the original soldier councils and placed under the command of Bolshevik commissars. A major cause of the 1919 defeat lay in this attempt to direct from isolated Berlin the sailor-soldier-worker councils in Wilhelmshaven, Kiel and Hamburg.

Where the German anarchists of that period (the Anarcho-Spartacists as opposed to the Communist Party Spartacists) also misfired in their consistent insistence on armed struggle, was their absence of deductive logic, which would have enabled them to draw from the actual events a correct conclusion and postulate it: *viz*, that armed insurrection was bound to failure, not so much on account of the often quoted reasons, but simply because the insurgent minority let themselves be misled, to adjust their actions to the strategical rules of formal military science. For that is precisely what happened in Germany in the years of 1918/19, 1921 and 1923.

The German anarchists had neglected the study of the early anarchist movement and consequently failed to reaffirm guerrilla tradition as the still most potent alternative to any military and police power of any regime, no matter how modern its scientific and technological progress.

* * *

By means of party discipline the authoritarian Marxists manage to keep opposition factions in line. Using, at leisure, the pretension of democracy, bourgeois and revolutionary armies have to impose authority of leaders onto the rank and file. In strict contrast to parties and reformist trade unions, the anarchist guerillas proclaim as their greatest asset the autonomy of the small unit. Holding on to this libertarian principle, they established a record that cannot be disputed. They have established the evidence that convincingly contradicts the stereotype accusations of all those who contend that anarchists are inefficient, that their concept of “no leaders — no centralization”, etc. gets one nowhere. If that were really so, why should so many Marxists have bothered to adopt anarchist guerrilla tactics, why should the general staffs of every country in wartime make use of resistance forces patterned after guerrilla methods, and why should governments everywhere employ their generals in working out special civil war contingency plans and specific anti-guerrilla strategy?

* * *

In the late '60s there were in Bolivia 22 leftist organisations belonging to the University Confederation of Bolivia. The members were sons of wealthy, respectable businessmen, civil servants and officers of the army. The Army had, after long effort, managed to kill Che Guevara. The students intended to rekindle the fire of revolution fading as a result of the death of Che. They were going to create a new guerrilla army. The poor peasants, discouraged by Che's demise, would take new heart and join the student guerrillas. This “New Teponte Guerrilla Army” consisted of 75 youngsters. They had not realized how drastically the rural guerrilla potential had been reduced. The U.S.A. counterrevolution had been systematically at work. Military centres had been established, where officers and instructors had been training men in counter guerrilla tactics. International military experts were convinced, that in view of the jungle warfare training and modern weaponry of the various South American police forces and armies, no other Castro would have a chance. Since Bolivia was especially vulnerable, the U.S.A. supplied everything needed for modern civil war and established on Bolivian soil, vast training camps with U.S. advisors.

During 1967 Guevara had seldom encountered more than 30–40 soldiers of the Government at any one time, but now the scene had changed. The Army encircled the new student guerrillas with a ring of 2,000 men in Redponte district. Strong units of “Rangers”, experienced in jungle tactics, were operating in the bush in a cat-and-mouse game directed by helicopters. At the very onset guerrilla scouts had been ambushed and eight of them killed. The guerrillas never saw any of their enemies.

The student guerrillas were badly armed. They had insufficient provisions. They had no guerrilla experience. They had not acquired the fitness needed. They could not get the support of the peasants who were too scared to help with food. They were exposed to sniping sharpshooters who always remained hidden. The guerrillas made endless marches but never encountered the enemy. In a state of complete exhaustion they were killed off one by one. Paz Zamora, a radical Christian guerrilla whose diary on the events has been preserved, collapsed and died, starved to death.

Great idealism and courage. But complete ignorance as to the condition and plans of the enemy. Unaware of the actual frame of mind of the people. Blinded by a legend built around their hero Guevara. Ignoring the most important teachings of seasoned guerrillas. Misled by their fixations.

To a certain extent romantic inclinations have also penetrated the anarchist movement. Tending towards insurgent views, intoxicated by the enthusiasm for the brave guerrillas, obsessed with the self-importance of the immature, many would not waste time on the study of military science, technology and guerrilla counter-techniques. Their antimilitarism led them to a generalization, which made them throw out the baby with the bath water.

The unhappy ending of Guevara, Zamora and so many others taught them nothing. It is all very well for the immature and facile to reject the study of the past — lock, stock and barrel — just because the version taught in school and university was a pack of lies. But for the sincere inquisitor there is no insurmountable barrier to the truth.

Let us look at post-WWII West Germany. The Adenauer republic had developed into a Wohlstands-Staat (wealth state) thanks to American investments. The workers were less than ever inclined to adopt revolutionary policy; they became, so to speak, prospective “partners” of the “new order” and were striving to gain a greater share in the dividends of the profit-system. The first radicalisation occurred around demonstrations against American intervention in Vietnam, but this was almost solely confined to middle class students and was dominated by various leftist groups. Anarchists were included, but they were hopelessly outnumbered by Maoists, who by their display of aggressive spirit and deliberate provocation against the police, hoped to impress the progressive liberals and militant workers. The workers refused to be drawn in. They realized that for many of the students the revolt had the nature of enjoyable student pranks. They were bourgeois kids playing at wild rebels with intent of shocking their teachers and society’s philistines. There was, in the beginning, little risk in provoking the police, who were under orders to abstain from aggression for the sake of democratic appearance. Police were permitted to use arms only when actually attacked. Encouraged by this police handicap certain fighting-mad demonstrators gave vent to their frustrations in a wild manner, which upped the ante and resulted in a change of police orders. In the course of events a student was killed and many wounded... Up to then, the various splinter groups taking part in the turbulent demonstrations, were each after their own agitational gains sake. But as the clashes with police newly equipped with modern antiriot gear resulted in defeats for the students, they lost the support of the many hangers-on who had enjoyed the kicks; likewise, liberal fellow-travellers were scared off. Now the militant groups began to attract society’s rejects, the so-called lumpenproletariat and dropouts. Thus history repeated itself. Once more, as in the case of Roehm’s S.A., the confused, the uncritical, the romantic and adventurous, and the downright psychopaths were absorbed. For apart from these doubtful sympathizers, the most extreme militants of German SDS, who became known as the Baader-Meinhof group (or more properly, the Red Army Fraction), stood isolated.

Rehashing old revolutionary catch-phrases picked-up in yesterday’s left-wing literature, they manipulated rhetorically with dialectical jugglery as arrogant and demagogic as Lenin, Luxemburg, Mussolini, Hitler and Goebbels. The Socialdemocrats and parliamentary system, sponsored as they were by the imperialist Western powers, became prime targets. Stalin’s Bolshevism got its share of bitter attacks. But Maoism was presented as a return to true Communism. Yet the militant section of the workers distrusted this new “polit” generation and stubbornly watched

with a critical eye the further development of this small minority within the universities, who now pushed themselves into the limelight claiming revolutionary leadership.

The students had misjudged the real situation. They took the Vietnam protest marches for a sign of an acute revolutionary mood. They next projected their own fury against the police onto the people and — wishfully — hoped that the sudden ruthless operations of the police would infuriate the majority of citizens and workers and stimulate them to join the student revolt. It did not.

To encourage the masses to fall in with them, the Baader-Meinhof people started their violent direct actions. The results are well known.

We have repeatedly criticized the revised urban guerrilla programs of the Marxists, including the RAF (Baader-Meinhof) version — especially the absurdity of the latter in calling themselves a fraction of a nonexistent Red Army. It brings to mind the historical Hauptmann von Koepernick incident (a simple cobbler masqueraded as a major and staged a military inspection). Their naivete is schoolkid like, if not schizophrenic. The stubborn block-headedness of their self-deception indicates a traumatic deathwish fixation, which attracts the equally neurotic. Ironically enough, the pretentious manner in which they lecture the workers does not strike them as identical to the sort of university lecturers they originally fiercely objected to in their antiauthoritarian student days.

Equally objectionable are dramatic adoption of names such as “People’s Courts” or “Revolutionary Tribunals”. It is tragic enough if a comrade, who by his collaboration with the police has caused arrest or destruction of other comrades and is likely to go on doing so, must be destroyed, without the executioners then playing at pseudo-military martial law. Anyone who has had to take part in a drama of charging a former fellow activist and then pronouncing and executing a verdict of guilty after a full confession of the accused will hope to be spared that experience for ever more.

We have criticized the RAF for its unbelievable disregard for the simplest security precautions and their recruitment of doubtful members. We have been outspoken but not one-sided. For we have also attacked anarchists who changed their position on armed struggle as soon as they saw the first red light. While the latter anxiously created alibis for themselves by adjusting their policy to exclusively legal tasks and withdrew their support for political prisoners in fear of being branded as supporters of “criminal” organizations, we on the other hand have *insisted* on upholding our right to express our opinions on the justification of armed resistance in defiance of all new laws reducing civil liberties.

We are all for intense industrial struggle and community activities. But we would also like to hear the voices of those who are not renouncing armed struggle. Must it be “all quiet on the anarchist guerilla front”? We are tired and sick of having the label “dangerous” stuck on anyone who dares to bell the devil’s tail. History will record that in the 1976 period of excessive repression, only the voice of the RAF, and their anarchist ally 2nd of June Group, was raised, and that alone is going to do the anarchist image in the future a great service. It will be said that the solidarity for political prisoners slipped out of the hands of explicitly anarchist groups and only RAF defenders stuck out their necks against the absolutely corrupted law. It will be said that purist-anarchist aid sank to the level of bourgeois charity.

We are dead-set against the Marxist-Leninist theories of the RAF and will go on opposing them as strongly as possible. We will unceasingly expose the fallacies of their guerrilla methods. But we will not deny them common solidarity when they fall beneath the merciless blows of a demented

State machine. And to their fallacious theories of liberation, we will vigorously counterpose the anarchist guerrilla method.

* * *

The early Germans were regarded as outstanding warriors. There is a certain affinity between their tradition and that of the libertarian guerrillas. The tribe would chose a combat leader out of their midst, in accordance to his previously displayed qualities. The entire tribe, including the women and children, participated in battle. A leader who did not come up to expectations, could be replaced at any time.

Even more remarkable were the "Wild Scythen", sometimes called Saken. Their fighting collective was also formed and controlled from below. They were horsemen and came from the steppes of the Don, the Volga, the Caucasus, and the Kaspi Lake district. They were nomads and shared everything in common. They first became known when mighty Assyria was attacked by the armies of the Herden. The Scythen defeated them, then conquered the rich cities of the Phoenicians, penetrating deep into Philister country, burning and sacking the temples of the Mother-Goddess Mylitta. Jehuda and Egypt were threatened and managed to stave off invasion only by buying their friendship with enormously costly presents. Gifts and Icot were equally divided. Most of the Scythen returned home, but many settled down in the country they had conquered despite its more sophisticated civilization. Yet their customs and ideas of free men soon infected others bound to irksome conventions and the reestablished authorities began to regard them as corrupters of morals and disturbers of the peace. Especially in the slave armies, where they were known as ringleaders of insubordination and revolts. Their spirit gradually spread to the Germans and Goths and later inspired Hunnes and Vandals. The revolts of the conquered Jews against the Romans show traces of Scythian influence, later to be found in the runaway Gladiator fraternities banded together with the Thracian Spartacus. The world conquest of the Romans does not exclusively belong to the credit of the Legions. Without the massive backup of the subordinated slave army, the Legion itself would have been less powerful. They were however superior to the armies of other nations on account of their strategically new battle formations, transport facilities, and endurance capacity of the highly trained Legion.

Historians of the old school made much fuss over the military genius of the Roman generals. Much praise was given to the amazing discipline of the Legion, which was attributed to the pride and spirit of the legionnaire. Yet even in the legion were still rudimentary elements of the 'control from below'. For it was the Legion who by vote or spontaneous actions, made or unmade the Caesars. The difference between the barbaric tribes of the Germans, Scythen, etc., was that the latter did not entrust total authority to their chosen leaders and entitled them no special privileges. Hardly ever did the schoolbook historians elaborate on the historical fact that the very best Roman generals suffered defeat through the hands of runaway gladiators and slaves, so long as the latter stuck by their guerrilla tactics and fraternal solidarity.

If the fraternal identity became upset by ambitious individuals or cliques, then the elementary resource of strength would drain away and disaster would follow. Spartacus was not defeated by the Roman generals, but by the slave army's own shortsightedness in allowing their original small group to be swamped by less streamlined runaway slaves, by rival conflicts with affiliated groups, by letting themselves be influenced through Roman renegades to adopt warfare techniques of the Legion.

After their defeat thousands of captured Spartacists were nailed to crosses erected along the highroads leading to Rome. These triumph signs of the masters were meant to act as deterrents.

Yet the meaning the Romans intended for the cross was turned into its opposite by the people's suffering under the Roman heel. It became a symbol of resistance — long before the Christians appeared and took the cross of crucifixion as their sacred talisman. And this incorporated even earlier currents of resistance, going back to the days of King Solomon whose sponsoring of Phoenician culture and the introduction of their gods into the Temple in Jerusalem enraged the Jehovah priest-caste and caused them to recruit nationalist activists to fight the Corybante priests of the Kybele and those Jewish rulers favouring foreign gods. 900 years before Christ the Middle East experienced every possible form of power struggle with which we are today acquainted: secret societies, conspiracies, organised riots, violent disruptions of religious gatherings, the use of explosives and assassination. When the Jews were exiled to Babylon, they managed to gain favour with the mighty and amass fortunes, which forced their return. The defeat of the Maccabees by Rome did not stop resistance, for they organized among exiled Jews and in the slave communities.

The first German guerrillas we know of were the 9th century runaway serfs, monastery novices and scholars fallen from official grace, who began to band together in the manner of their forefathers, the Nethersaxons, who had been butchered wholesale by the Christian invaders of Charlemagne. The runaways were joined by the pariah-class *knackers*, the outcast story tellers and mountebank ballad singers, the women fortune-tellers and healers, as well as criminal fugitives. They took refuge in the woods and mountains. Here they established free communities. They were supported by the nearby peasantry. They waylaid and robbed the caravans of the rich merchants and took hostages for ransom, they ambushed unpopular knights, relieving them of life and arms. Their stories were passed on orally. We know that those who acted in mutual agreement and common sharing lasted longest. Their incentive rested on a natural law: the more ruthless the enforced servitude, the more radical the resistance. The level of oppression determined the measure of resistance.

The serf of the medieval age was less cared for than a head of cattle. He had no rights whatsoever, could be sold or beaten to death. If he ran away, he became "vogelfrei" (free as a bird). Anyone could kill him on sight. Anyone who sheltered or fed him became an outcast in turn. He was therefore dependent on the solidarity of other outcasts. We have no authentic statistics as to their numbers, but can only draw conclusions from fragmentary church files referring to their crimes and punishments, if caught, and the punishments were always exceedingly cruel. They were labeled as devil's spawn, cut-throats, merciless incendiaries, cruel bandits capable of every imaginable atrocity.

The barbaric justice of the rulers — hanging, beheading, quartering, burning to death — did not break the spirit of resistance, nor reduce the sympathy of the common people; on the contrary, it stiffened the bitter popular resentment, it lingered on underground as a latent smouldering until it flared up in the great German Peasant Revolution. This ought to be a lesson to contemporary rulers, who believe their sophisticated justice can postpone the approaching general reckoning.

Nothing the medieval rulers did could stamp out completely the menace threatening their establishment. The more hysterical the denunciations from the church pulpits, the greater the admiration of the people for the rebels. The harder the punishment, the deeper the sympathy. The agitators, in word and song, or whispered message, could not be silenced by chasing them from the village green, by pillorying them, throwing them into dungeons, beating them to a pulp or tearing their tongues out. It is to their credit that a wave of dance mania and a blasphemy craze swept the country, inflicting the first cracks in the foundation of ecclesiastical power. We now

know that the inquisition and burning of witches — apart from robbing the rich of their wealth — was an attempt by the church to arrest a sexual revolution and to destroy the last rudiments of pagan ideology, which had survived evergreen among the people, despite the centuries of Christianity. Behind the secret adoration for the “wise women” stood an anonymous and silent women’s liberation impulse, in stubborn passive resistance to the malegod tyranny of Jehovaism.

The past is more relevant to the present and more significant to the outcome of the future than our student comrades, in their contempt for the study of history, seem to think.

The Hansa, for example, was in a position of unchallenged worldwide power. The new merchant class was contesting the power of the Church and kings, and their influence reached from the far corners of Russia, over Finland and Scandinavian to England and from there down to Sicily. But then their power was suddenly and dangerously challenged by pirates, by declassé seafarers. So long as these pirates — who resembled very much the land guerrillas — stuck to their hit-and-run tactics, they were extremely difficult to apprehend and the damage they inflicted upon the mighty Hansa federation of the major German ports made the rising merchant class tremble. Disaster overtook the pirates when they no longer kept to their small, fast craft, but began to employ the large vessels of the Hansa which they had captured, and began collecting a fleet with which they hoped to enter into formal naval competition.

The strategical advantage of the small craft had always been appreciated by the Asian and Mediterranean pirates since the beginning of seafaring conquest and freebooting. Similar to land guerrilla warfare, where the small unit had the advantage over huge, cumbersome armies, the pirate too could outmaneuver oversized merchantmen or heavily armed war vessels. The spontaneity of action favoured the small craft, in addition to the daredevil spirit of the lawless pirate band, especially when facing crews or soldiers who were likely pressganged and ill-treated and could often be induced to fraternize with the pirates instead of fighting them.

Some famous oriental pirates were courted by potentates who engaged them in waging naval battle against rival powers. Here too, if the pirates made the mistake of abandoning their tradition and accepted the leader-authority of a pirate chief newly elevated to admiral status in the formal fleet, abandoning their old autonomy of action, things always went wrong in the final chapters.

The peasants of the Great Peasant Revolution were in the beginning armed primarily with flails, scythes and pitchforks. They set fire to castles and monasteries and by the sheer force of their rebellious enthusiasm beat off the mercenary troops sent by the feudalists to crush them. There followed then fraternization with the Landsknechts, many of whom were of peasant stock. Their officers, from the lower nobility, were immensely attracted by the reckless spirit of the rebel camps, the bawdy songs and folkdances not tolerated by the church authorities elsewhere, the anticlerical sentiments expressed, and, holding grudges of their own against the higher aristocracy, many joined in the peasant revolution.

What happened then was identical to what occurred in the Spartacus slave rising. The peasants were led to give up the spontanaeist ‘undisciplined’ actions and trust the military leadership of their noble friends. They were drawn into power politics, conflicting aspirations; they were sold-out by Martin Luther, and then, confused and demoralised, the peasants were finally crushed.

So far every social revolution has gotten tangled in the clash of rival factions and has been led astray. At the root cause of each failure we find some “friend of the people”. Look today at Germany, where the prototype of the intellectual, the Socialdemocratic Helmut Schmidt, is far more dangerous than his forerunner Noske “the bloodhound”.

The bourgeois revolution, in its last phase, is the revolution of the intellectuals. To this strata of society belong the propagators of the managerial revolution, the elite of science and technology. Which includes the great: Marx, Lenin, Mao, and the small: Dutschke, Cohn-Bendit, Baader and Meinhof. All of them are personified 'intellect contra instinct'. Their character is marked by elitest conceit, this heritage of feudalism. They stand on an imaginary height — vying with the Zarathustrian superman of Friedrich Nietzsche — from where they lecture the ignorant. Through their fine addresses to the workers breaks the lightening of concealed contempt — no better epitomized than by the disgust Leon Trotsky felt for the masses. They are the well-trained pupils of the father of State philosophy, Plato.

The anarchist becomes activated by the rebellious impulse of the people. Not vice versa. There is presently far too much Marxist-style lecturing among anarchists. At the gut-level, the people don't have to be taught anything, they know. As much as the anarchist and as little. So too the petit bourgeois knows. The rulers know. Action speaks more than words.

The anarchist does not want to mould and direct. He gets down into the anonymous will of the people under the impact of a crisis which has set them in motion. In this situation all the repressed emotions explode, instinct presents the bill and this instinct is the fruit of all past frustrations. It has its own reasoning power and the irrefutable right of a natural law.

The common sense of the people has always bordered on anarchist sentiments. When told they may not take the law into their own hands, their emotional response to this reveals their latent distrust and hatred of "The Law". There is law, but no justice. This feeling of the underprivileged is even shared by the petit bourgeois. When forced to seek the aid of a lawyer he goes not because of a belief in justice, but because he hopes the lawyer can outwit the law. He remains unaware of the fact that in the depths of his heart, he really desires the destruction of the law. Admitting that utility-democracy has its drawbacks, he argues that so does every other system. He cannot know that Anarchism offers an alternative, for history records no anarchist organisation or community yet providing an example of its workability. And why?

Because these few full-blown attempts — the Makhnovist Ukraine, the Korean communes in Manchuria, the anarcho-sindicalist collectivizations in Spain — were beset by compromise, betrayed by the Bolsheviks, crushed by the Reaction, and buried beneath a torrent of historical falsification.

* * *

What exactly is the root of the tremendous power of the State? Military manpower? Superior weaponry?

The knight in early medieval time was superior to the mass of serfs because he was in possession of a sword and a battle horse, both costly and out of reach of the dispossessed. This weaponry gave him superiority and authority of command. Besides, he was commissioned by the grace of Almighty god. Yet his powers rested in neither, but rather in the fact that the serfs believed uncritically in his superiority. What gave them into his hands was their ignorance and fear, deriving from religious superstition and myth. And today? The progressive generation has not discarded God, but merely replaced him with another. Modern man believes in the absolute superiority of the scientist and technician, the high priests of a new religion.

One look at history will show that the more elaborate the weapons development, the more handicapped was the aristocratic overlord. His movements, conditioned by the heaviness of his ever-increasing armour, restricted mobility. He developed a technique suitable only for a specialized aristocratic sport. But on the battlefield, standing out among the multitude on foot, he

became a target, not only for knightly combat, but also for the less well-equipped underlings, conscripted serfs or hired peasants, who could bring him down easily, by cutting with a scythe the sinews of his overburdened battle horse.

During clashes in 1920's Germany between demonstrators and police on horseback, pepper bags were thrown at the horses' eyes and acid sprayed on their underbelly and private parts, causing havoc to the police.

There never has been any weapon that could not be rendered useless by simple means of sabotage. All that was needed was the knowhow. There has not been one new strategy, not one technological improvement, not one advantage of mechanization, that could not be overcome by a countermeasure. One needn't have dynamite to put a computer out of action. Every government knows this from their own sabotage and guerrilla operations in times of war. Which is why they secretly quake with fear.

Any action that helps to break the spell of fear among the people, which the powerful assiduously cultivate, is half the battle won. Any historical research destroying the legends nurtured by the ruling overlords past and present is the antidote needed to render their poisonous lies ineffective. For instance, is it true that the brave loyal Prussian Army defeated the 1848/49 insurgents in Hessen? Did Generalfieldmarshall Hindenburg crush the German Spartacists in 1918/19 because he was a military genius and had the greater arms potential? True to the facts is that the people of Hessen, badly armed and inexperienced in warfare, defeated twice the overwhelming forces of the German princes. Truth is that Hindenburg was not the mastermind behind the Tannenberg victory over the Russians and that he could not prevent the Red sailors from taking over the fleet in Kiel and Wilhemshaven, nor halt them from capturing Brunswick, Hamburg, Bremen, the Industrial Ruhr towns and the capital Berlin.

No, again, and again, the counterrevolution triumphed only by employing every means of deceit, treason, and atrocities to confuse and demoralize the insurgents, infiltrating their ranks with agent provocateurs, bribing and blackmailing, employing traitors and assassins. And in every case, they crowned their terrorism with a merciless revenge in the aftermath.

Then they would hammer it in: "Resisting the mighty is futile". Then one witness the frightened would-be revolutionaries parroting: "Anyone still preaching armed struggle is irresponsible." Thus the legend of superior power and the impossibility of overthrowing it by armed action was once more established.

Granted, a gun is a stronger weapon than a bare fist. Granted the Spanish workers lost against the mechanized intervention of Hitler and he, in turn, lost out against the enormous output of the U.S. war industry. But equally true is that a man without a gun has many times beaten his armed aggressor and that savages, armed with bow and arrow, were not everytime defeated by invaders equipped with gun and cannon. What we are saying is that the unarmed man is not necessarily without a chance. During the Spanish civil war the people amazed the onlooking world when they managed to produce, against all the odds, guns, armoured cars and planes. In fact, the most fruitful war industries were those operated by the anarcho-syndicalist worker collectives.

It is our argument that the Spanish people would have stood up better if they had not allowed themselves to be bewitched by the strategy of fascist mechanization which they faced, but instead adopted general guerrilla warfare as was actually advocated by some Spanish anarchists at that time. The same view was expressed by anarchists in Britain during World War II in the face of Hitler's threat of invasion. We still maintain the validity of this our conviction.

Anyone who advocated insurgent action in this general prewar period was looked upon as a Fifth Columnist. The British Communists, of course, practised flea-jumping acrobatics: “Up the war” one day, “down the war” the next, “up the war” again on the third. In contrast, anarchists and Trotskyists upheld and propagated revolutionary principles. Since they were regarded by the British government as a minority with no base in the working class, they were considered harmless and the State afforded them the leniency to carry on, thus bolstering the regime’s claim of democracy. But when the militant dockers, miners and railway workers launched a continuous series of wildcat strikes, the alarmed authorities blamed the Trotskyists and clamped down on them. But the strikes increased and in addition, mutinies occurred in many theatres of war and when Scotland Yard and the Whitehall security discovered in the possession of members of the forces subversive anarchist material, it was the turn of the anarchists to be rounded up.

Be it remembered, however, that what the anarchists advocated in their leaflets and illegal “Soldier’s Letter” was not defeatism or surrender or even pacifism. But rather soldier councils and a people’s resistance to Fascism.

Our principled rejection of militarism ought not to lead us into inattention to military science, nor should we overlook the fact that the warrior instinct is still very much alive in every human being and conclusively contradicts pacifist ideals. In fact, this natural aggressive inclination finds confirmation in the preaching of love, for it reveals the preacher’s own fear of the harmful consequences that might occur should he ever let himself become overwhelmed by his basic aggressive impulses.

A mother, generally regarded as the incarnation of love and harmony, will turn into a raving beast in defence of her child.

“Armed resistance is suicidal.” That, comrades, was the preaching of the Church. “Do not resist the authorities.” “Give the Emperor what is the Emperor’s”. That is the teaching of the bourgeoisie. It became the gospel too of the Socialdemocrats and German Communists. To maintain their seats in the Government, arse to arse, with the liberals, smirked at by the conservatives, they helped to reintroduce the notorious oppression methods Hitler built upon. They did this while draping themselves in the Black, Red and Gold colours.

The liberterian legacy-fetishists who now suddenly denounce armed struggle turn into satellites of the Socialdemocrats and reveal themselves as mere red-tinted bourgeoisie. They can hardly be called renegades, as they were never revolutionaries. They deceive themselves if they believe the counterrevolution will spare them, just as did the Socialdemocrats, Trade unionists and Communists, who all thought the Nazis would compromise with them. The genuine revolutionist may, in times of repression and the people passive, go underground, but never will he give up his determination to fight. If he did he would lose his self-respect.

“Rather dead than a slave!” That was the slogan of the Nethersaxons, when they had the choice to renounce their beliefs or be killed. This proud spirit did not vanish when they were killed, it inspired permanent resistance in the following generations and gradually undermined the power of the church.

A chain of abortive insurrections does not prove the impregnable power of the oppressor. It is always the last battle that is decisive and that battle has not yet come. It won’t commence, so long as the oppressor manages to convince the oppressed that it is wiser for them to submit without a fight. Reward for such submission is the gracious liberty to administer mosquito stings to the gigantically swollen and thick-skinned power-monster, which do not harm, but rather helps to give the impression of tolerance.

“Pay your taxes, that I may grow more powerful; produce arms, with which I can crush the rebels; build prison fortresses where I can break the backbone of the upright; — then you may even express complaints, within the framework of the permissible, of course. I will listen to them, and shelve them, at my pleasure. The age of barricades is over, once and for all. We remove them with remote-controlled bulldozers. We clean the streets of demonstrators with water cannons. Our policemen wear bulletproof uniforms. Their machine-pistols shoot a hundred times more bullets a second than yours. Fraternizations? Insurrections? Only if we sponsor them, for purposes of our own. We — the CIA; the DDP; the NSC and CIP; the KGB and SSD. Remember the Junta coups in Greece; the killing of Che Guevara; the ousting of Allende; the Spinola role in Portugal, etc. etc.”

Alright, Gentlemen: That is one side of your medallion. What about the reverse? At the back of your powerboasts, we detect your cold sweat, caused by the nonstop growth of social-revolutionary trends in every part of the globe. The possibility that your repressive methods will result in the very thing you wish to prevent — the sparking of a universal armed insurrection — that is what is driving you insane.

What is the concrete situation for anarchists today?

In Germany, neither the Baader-Meinhof group, nor the 2nd of June branch, succeeded in gaining mass support. Historians keep saying that the time of anarchist mass following belongs to the past. Anarcho-syndicalism was crushed by the wave of Fascism in the 20's and 30's and now exhibits only isolated resurgence in Spain. Anarchocommunism and worker councilism suffered a similar demise at the hands of both Reaction and Bolshevism, and its present-day revivals are likewise isolated and often liquidated. (vz. Hungary 1956, Portugal 1975). The once worldwide I.W.W. organisation also declined after long persecution and has not picked up to any appreciable degree. Communism is conquering the field. Fascism is gaining strength. If both are bourgeois aftermaths, anarchists will have to reconsider their stand regarding the Marxist transition theory.

If declared anarchists, affected by the scare of antiterrorist legislation, openly withdraw from the armed struggle position, proclaiming it to be essential to confine themselves *exclusively* to industrial struggle, the young insurgent anarchists, forced into isolation, will have to make up their minds once and for all whether it remains viable to recruit just anyone — and rake again the same mistakes of their predecessors — or to take new tack. The historical role of *isolated* anarchists has always been to function like yeast. That is no mean role. If anarchist and Marxist comrades cannot see it, the heads of government surely do. If the brisk agitators of the Left ascribe the lack of mass support to the anarchists' inability to organise, the security forces of the State know better and are accordingly worried. They remember well that there were in the Kaiser's Reich of 1914 only a mere handful of anarchists and anarcho-communists but that in 1916 — overnight — workers' councils appeared in every industrial section of Germany and initiated a tidal wave of anti-war demonstrations and massive strikes.

The 1968 vintage of German students in their antiauthoritarian fury were obsessed with purging the past and discarding old values. Yet at the same time they were eagerly looting, like rag and bone pickers, both anarchist and pseudo-anarchist historical baggage. That period of fermentation is now over. Elitism has lost its fascination. The pendulum oscillation towards extreme intellectualism has reversed towards common sense, matured in everyday's grim reality. New groupings are occurring which have taken stock of the recent past. They seem sincere in their endeavor to assimilate the thesis and antithesis of authoritarianism contra libertarianism, that

were causing eternal frictions. The near future will show if they will succeed in finding a workable synthesis.

The miscarriage of armed actions through methods in flagrant contrast to libertarian concepts have been earnestly analysed. Justification of armed struggle has not been disproved. Repressive methods characterise the extent of insecurity felt by the regime. The sword of justice cuts two ways. The deterrent effect paralyses the weak, but it also deepens the scorn felt by the just. The more brutal the regime, the more that brutality will mobilise and activate resistance. The much-vaunted theory that rebellion erupts not in time of extreme misery and repression, but rather in a period of liberalisation and rising expectation, snugly ignores the seething hatred and underground stirrings that will break forth from even the smallest crack — only in hindsight to be considered a liberal concession.

No ever so crushing defeat of rebellion is absolutely final. The backbone of the revolution cannot be broken, simply because the law of nature is unalterable: pressure produces counterpressure. Although the urge for freedom may seem to be dulled, it nevertheless remains embodied as a dormant but permanent risk factor. Since restriction of freedom constitutes a permanent condition of any regime, we may well look upon it as the Achille's heel of all establishments, the vulnerability inducing persistent and aggressive opposition. Every regime justifies its existence by the claim of creating peace and order, essential for general welfare. Yet, since no regime grants unlimited freedom and cannot establish universal contentment, it is, paradoxically the author of chronic unrest.

Strengthening of armed forces and the use of governmental terrorism provides the evidence for the potential power of the revolution. This armoured plating actually constitutes the fissure in the seemingly unconquerable superpower; it is here that the revolutionary agitation persistently drives a wedge. And even were revolutionists to fail to do so, the acid of the people's resentment would eat its way through, gradually but surely.

The armed actions of rebels — the skillful and abortive ones alike — are the distant lightening of a tempest growing. The harsh punishments meted out by the regime to reveal its panic, leading it to ever increased violations of ethical pretensions. With each new abuse of power the regime reduces its moral prestige. In contrast, the courageous rebels, the political prisoners enduring vicious captivity, increase respect and admiration for themselves as well as the willingness to aid them, even though it involves the danger of being dragged into court and charged with "support of a criminal organisation". For every rebel jailed, tortured and killed, ten new sympathizers can be mobilised.

While the counterrevolutionary power of computerised security forces and armies is ballooning monstrously, guerilla tactics are still the most potential and dangerous counter-factor. The best armed Goliath can still be put out of action by a stone slung by a small David. The mighty elephant fears most of all a tiny rodent.

The insurgent anarchist knows, in the present situation, the one most important thing: to remain alert, to keep a sharp eye on the enemy, to discover the most vulnerable points in the dragon's skin. And to avoid the mistakes made by rebels in the past. Those who, in times of acute repression, weather through the tough schooling, will gain thereby sufficient insight of human nature to judge precisely who will prove a trustworthy comrade-in-arms when it comes to popular revolt. In the final battle, aimed at the overthrow of the regime, every uncompromising fighter is a natural ally, no matter if he came originally from working class or bourgeois environment. By the act of his complete identification with the uncompromising antiauthoritarian revolutionists

joining in the fight of the people for freedom, he dissolves his previous class bondage and becomes an instrument of a classless community.

John Olday
10 April 1976

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



John Olday
Trotz Allendem
a polemic on guerrilla warfare — excerpts
April 10, 1976

<https://archive.elephanteditions.net/library/john-olday-trotz-allendem>

Trotz Allendem (“In Spite of All” Title of 1848 poem by Hervregh). John Olday was an Anglo-German revolutionary anarchist a veteran of the 1918 sailor-worker insurrection in Hamburg, 1919 Spartacus revolt, 1921 & ’23 uprisings and worker councils. Expelled from Communist Youth for ‘anarchist-guerrillism’ he joined Anarcho-Spartacists. Anti-Nazi resistance escaped Gestapo; jailed by British for revolutionary anti-militarism in WWII. He edited “Mit-Teilung”, a revolutionary broadsheet, and was a member of the General Defense Committee (IWW).

John Olday is noted as a revolutionary cartoonist., esp. The March to Death (Freedom Press,1943).

Workers News Service (Toronto) 1976. This edition published by Kaleidoscope.

theanarchistlibrary.org