

Yalensky's Fable: A History of the Anarchist Black Cross

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For close to a century, anarchists have united under the banner of the Anarchist Black Cross for the sole purpose of supporting those comrades imprisoned for their commitment to revolution and to the ideas of anarchism. Who would have suspected that a few men supplying boots, linen, and clothing to deportees in Bialostock would have been the meager beginnings of an organization that has spread throughout the globe?¹

Recently statements have been made, referring to the history of the Anarchist Black Cross as mere folklore. While I admit the history of this organization seems evasive at the surface level, a deeper search for the organization's history uncovers a rich amount of information that is far from folklore or fairy tales. This article is just a small amount of the history that has been discovered in just a couple of years of research.

Hundreds of pages filled with facts regarding the history of the organization is presently being assembled by members of the Los Angeles Branch Group of the Anarchist Black Cross Federation in hopes of one day printing this information in books, pamphlets, etc. We present the information in hopes of bringing unity and knowledge within the ranks of those who struggle for the support of political prisoners throughout the world.

The Anarchist Black Cross dates back to the beginning of the last century during the politically turbulent times of Tsarist Russia. Due to the cruel aristocratic rule of the Tsar during the late years of the 19th century, many Russians began to search for answers beyond what the present political institution could provide for the Russian people. This search led many people to find answers in the socialist and anarchist ideas that were being introduced by Western European revolutionaries.

The words of Karl Marx and Michael Bakunin created a massive stir within the soul of the Russian people and their desire for freedom lead many of them to rebel against the conditions of toil and serfdom that defined their very existence. With the rise of political opposition to the Tsar, many anarchists, socialists, and revolutionaries paid for their desire for freedom by imprisonment, exile or death. Conditions within the prisons were unbearable and those imprisoned for political actions faced considerably cruel treatment.²

A prisoner aid organization called 'Political Red Cross' was formed to provide support for those political prisoners kept within the confines of Tsarist prisons or labor camps. This organization not only provided aid to prisoners, but many times assisted in the planned escapes from prisons or places of exile. The great anarchist thinker, Peter Kropotkin was one of the many former political prisoners that owe their freedom to members of this organization.³

Although these organizations were, in theory, non-partisan, it wasn't long before the Social-Democrats (the followers of Karl Marx) gained control of the organization. Aid to anarchist prisoners, as well as any other political prisoner not associated with the Social-Democratic Party, soon began to dwindle.

Anarchists outside of the prisons were unaware that the funds given to the Political Red Cross were not reaching their imprisoned comrades. When made aware of such news they were infuriated by the divisiveness of the Social-Democrats.⁴ It became self-evident to the anarchists that the only way their comrades would receive the help they needed was for the anarchist community to create their own aid organization and the Anarchist Red Cross (ARC) was formed.

¹ Yelensky, Boris. *The Struggle For Equality*. pg 22

² Voline. *The Unknown Revolution*. pg 27-31

³ Broido, Vera. *Apostles Into Terrorists*. pg 96

⁴ *Freie Arbeiter Stimme*. February 10 1956

The exact date of the Anarchist Red Cross' creation is unclear, but because of recent data that has emerged, we have been able to narrow the time frame to within a few months. Furthermore, it is important to take note that there are two dates of importance: the date of the first Anarchist Red Cross activities and the creation the ARC as an international organization. Both these dates have been referenced by several people as the date the organization began. It is this reason that has caused some troubles pinning down a time frame.

According Rudolph Rocker, once the Secretary-Treasurer for the Anarchist Red Cross, the organization formed during the period of 1900 to 1905. According to his statement, the organization came about during a meeting in London with Vera Figner, who was the treasurer for the political prisoners of the Party of the Socialist Revolutionaries.⁵

Recent research has discovered this meeting probably took place in the summer of 1907. According to the London Times in August of that year, the Russian Social Revolutionary Party had a conference in London, where Figner is known to have been one of the attendees. According to various other sources, the London ARC, as well as the New York chapter, began in 1907, which would fall in line with this time frame

Though the actual date of Vera Figner's meeting in London has yet to be established, a few facts from that meeting are known. One important fact was that all in attendance had agreed that this new prisoner aid organization would support both Anarchist and Socialist-Revolutionaries in prison and in exile, where ever the two existed, since both had been excluded from the Political Red Cross.⁶ They refused to make the same mistake the Social-Democrats made by excluding others because they were not from the same political thought. As long as prisoners were social revolutionaries they should be supported.

Despite Rocker's account that the Figner meeting was the birth of the ARC, earlier accounts have shown an earlier beginning. According to Harry Weinstein, who is considered the father of the Anarchist Red Cross, he and a friend, B. Yelin, began the ARC in Bialystok after being released sometime in August of 1906. Additional information provided by Weinstein, indicates the creation of the organization in Russia had to have been sometime in later part of that year.

We do know the organization had groups in Kiev, Odessa, Bialystok, and other cities by the end of 1906. In the 1906–1907 trials of revolutionaries at least six members of the organization were tried and convicted for their involvement in the 1905 Revolution. Members of the organization and other revolutionaries fled the country in fear of mass arrests and persecution. Many of those who managed to escape were the first to start chapters of the Anarchist Red Cross in other countries.

The Figner meeting should be considered the beginning of the ARC international. It helped to establish the first chapter outside of Russia. This group became the main chapter as other chapters emerge through the years. The organization collected funds from other chapters throughout Europe and sent those funds to the politicals in Russia. Those involved in the London branch included Peter Kropotkin, Alexander Shapiro, V. Cherkezov, and Rudolf Rocker. The following year, the first North American chapter was started in New York and soon other group sprung up with chapters in various cities including Chicago, Philadelphia, Brownsville, Detroit, and Baltimore.⁷

⁵ Yelensky, B. *The Struggle For Equality*. pg 20

⁶ Yelensky, B. *The Struggle for Equality*. pg 20

⁷ Letter from P. Avrich to Matthew Hart.

Propaganda by the Deed

It is important to understand that even though these men and women fled Russia, their dedication against injustice still remained as strong as ever. Members of the Anarchist Red Cross brought with them their passion for the anarchist ideal as well as their belief in the ³propaganda by the deed.²

On January 27, 1914, a member of the Chicago chapter of the Anarchist Red Cross, Morris Bernstein, was arrested after being accused of inciting a riot during an unemployment protest. Shortly after the arrest, Capt. James Storen of the Chicago police received an anonymous letter written in red ink and adorned with skulls and cross bones. It carried a threat that the station would be blown up unless Bernstein and the others arrested were not liberated.

Later that evening, the target of the unemployment protest, Harry Fishman, discovered a skull and cross bones written in red chalk on the front of his house, along with a threat against the employer and his family. These incidents were attributed to the Anarchist Red Cross.

Later that year, in response to John D. Rockefeller's involvement in the massacre of striking workers and their families in Ludlow, Colorado, members of the Lettish section of the Anarchist Red Cross and others began to design a plot to assassinate J.D. Rockefeller.⁸

Sadly, on the morning of the planned assassination the would-be-assassins were getting ready to unfold their plot when the bomb planned for Industrialist, went off in the apartment where the anarchists were staying, killing ARC members Charles Berg, Carl Hanson, and two other individuals. The bomb showered the street below with debris and body parts. Dozens of people were injured and the repression after the incident increased heavily. This event became known as the "Lexington Avenue bombing." Other individuals not associated with the organization were involved but it is known that at least one other Anarchist Red Cross member, Louise Berger, was apart of the plot. Luckily Berger left the building minutes before and she got away unharmed (less than ten years later she would lose her life to illness in Russia.)⁹

Russian Revolution and the Continued Repression

With the outbreak of the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Anarchist Red Cross in the United States disbanded after news was received that all the political prisoners were released from the Russian jails. Several ARC members went to assist the revolution in Russia, where they were warmly met by the political prisoners they had once supported. But before long Russia would once again have political prisoners, arrested by the Bolsheviks government this time.¹⁰ With the rise of a new dictatorship in Russia the ARC was forced to reorganize in 1919 (known at this point as the Anarchist Black Cross.) The organization changed its name to avoid confusion between them, the International Red Cross and the Political Red Cross.¹¹ In the Ukraine, the Black Cross was organized as defensive units under the Makhno's army. The purpose of the units was to protect cities and villages and organize resistance from pogroms lead by from Cossacks, White guards, or the Red Army. Many of those involved in these units were members of the Nabat

⁸ Zinn, Howard. *A People's History Of The United States 1492-Present*. pg 346-347

⁹ Goldman, Emma. *Living My Life*. pg 533

¹⁰ Letter from P. Avrich to Matthew Hart.

¹¹ Avrich, P. *The Russian Anarchist*. pg 136-137

Confederation in the Ukraine or had previously been active in the Anarchist Red Cross in the United States.¹²

Because of their activities, the Anarchist Black Cross members experienced constant harassment by the Bolshevik government including the seizure of goods being shipped to political internees, creating laws against the organization thus making its activities illegal, and the murder of ABC activists. By 1924–1925, the organization in Russia was virtually destroyed. Several members of the organization, like Lea Gutman, Helana Ganshina, and Aaron Baron, were arrested and later killed by the Bolshevik government. Others were arrested but due to international campaigns brought on by anarchists abroad, the Communist government was forced to release them.¹³

At least two ARC members actually converted to Bolshevism, only to have their lives destroyed during the Stalinist purges.

Several individuals who manage to escape or were released from Bolshevik prisons met up in Berlin where they reorganized the ABC. The organization continued its activities there for several years before moving to Holland and then to Paris. Chapters in the United States reemerged once again to support the comrades still left behind in Russian jails, but by 1936 contact with comrades in Russian prisons began to dwindle and by 1940 all contacts with prisoners in Russia ceased. Later it became known that most, if not all, anarchist political prisoners were killed during Stalin's purges.¹⁴

World War II

By this time, the Spanish Civil War and then Second World War broke out in Europe, and the organization switched to a more international focus. ABC worked diligently to aid anarchist comrades fleeing from Fascist persecution as well as assisting those arrested in the resistance movement throughout Europe.

Most of the ABC members at this time were Russian-Jews, so being caught in Europe during this period was almost certain death for these people. Once again, Social-Democrats headed up gravely important organizations that meant the very livelihood of many anarchists. This time it was Jewish Labor Committee, which assisted Jewish refugees in escaping from Hitler and Europe. The Social-Democrats refusal to assist ABC in helping their comrades escape caused hundreds of Jewish Anarchists to die in Nazi concentration camps.

By 1939, most of the chapters in the United States and Europe were crushed by the amount of aid needed for anarchist prisoners and many have pointed to this period in which the organization folded. Under the title, "the Anarchist Black Cross" this is true, but the organization continued under several different names for almost two decades. (The Joint Committee for the Defense of Revolutionists Imprisoned in Russia, Society to Aid Anarchist Prisoners in Russia, Relief Fund of the International Working Men's Association, Chicago Aid Fund, and the Alexander Berkman Aid Fund.) All these organizations mentioned were recognized as groups continuing the work of the Anarchist Black Cross by its members and those individuals they supported.¹⁵

¹² Bulletin of the Anarchist Black Cross, London. July, 1967

¹³ Bulletin of the Anarchist Red Cross, New York. 1924

¹⁴ Yelensky, B. Twentieth Anniversary Alexander Berkman Aid Fund of the International Workingmen Association. pg 7

¹⁵ Letter from P. Avrich to Matthew Hart.

Towards the end of the war, only a few groups remained active in prisoner aid work. The Berkman Aid Fund in Chicago, one of the few groups able to organize serious aid operations, was able to reorganize a Paris branch where C.A.R.E. packages were sent to anarchists in serious need of funds and support. This work went on for many years but due to a lack of support needed to maintain its work, the group was not able to continue its activities after 1958.¹⁶

The Second Wave

In 1967, the organization resurfaced in England where it initially worked to aid prisoners of the Spanish resistance. The London ABC began to promote the concept of the Black Cross and during the International Anarchist Conference in Carrara their call for an International Anarchist Black Cross was answered. Other chapters emerged throughout Europe, United States and Australia. Groups like the chapters in Australia and London, were organized by or had membership that were part of the Spanish resistance movement at one point in time.¹⁷

But the early success of the organization was also met with some great losses. The organization watched as the police in various countries detained, tried, and even murdered members of the ABC. Stuart Christie, one of the founders of the London chapter of the organization was arrested on several occasions including one case where he was imprisoned for more than a year after being accused of having been involved in the Angry Brigade, an underground group active in the United Kingdom in the 1970s. In the end, he was found innocent of all charges and released.¹⁸

On December 12, 1969, Guiseppi Pinelli, member of the Milan chapter of the Anarchist Black Cross, was arrested in relation to several bombings throughout Italy. This was not the first time the police tried to pin a bombing on Pinelli or other members of the Milan Anarchist Black Cross. For three days, Pinelli was interrogated and harassed by the Milan police. On the third day, December 15, a few minutes before mid-night, Pinelli was thrown from the fourth story of the police station where he received fatal injuries. The authorities claimed Pinelli had admitted to the charges against him before jumping out the window to his death.¹⁹ Pinelli and another anarchist by the name of Valpreda were accused of the bombing despite recent evidence produced by the London based 'Observer' that indicated the sudden rash of bombings in Italy was the work of neo-fascists. Later it became known that these bombings were in fact apart of fascist plot, backed by the CIA and NATO, known as "the strategy of tension." The plan was to plant bombs and pin the actions on 'the Left' causing so much demand for law and order, the fascists would be able to walk right into power. Pinelli was targeted because he was a well-known anarchist and it was known that he was in the process of an investigation regarding allegations of a planned fascist coup in Italy prior to his murder. The Anarchist Black Cross in Milan, at the time, was infiltrated by neo-fascists and it became clear to the police, who were involved in the plot, that Pinelli might be aware of who those infiltrators were, as well as, the very plot against him. It became necessary to kill Pinelli to ensure the plot's integrity.²⁰

¹⁶ Yelensky, B. Twentieth Anniversary Alexander Berkman Aid Fund of the International Workingmen Association. pg 7

¹⁷ Bulletin of the Anarchist Black Cross. July, 1967

¹⁸ Anarchist Black Cross Bulletin No. 2, Chicago Anarchist Black Cross. September-October 1972

¹⁹ New York Times. December 12, 1969

²⁰ Christie, Stuart. Stefano Delle Chiaie: Portrait Of A Black Terrorist. pg 63-64

On December 4, 1971, Georg von Rauch, Secretary of the Anarchist Black Cross in Germany, was pulled over by the police. During the incident, von Rauch and a police officer opened fire on each other resulting in von Rauch being shot and instantly killed.²¹ Several months later, Augsburg police closed in on two known radicals. During the arrest, one of the officers with an 'itchy trigger' shot Thomas Weissbecker, who died instantly. Weissbecker had also been a member of the Anarchist Black Cross in Germany, and both Weissbecker and von Rauch had also been associated with the Movement 2 June, one of the most prominent left-wing German urban guerrilla groups of the seventies. The two had been part of the counter-culture movement and revolutionary left and took part in several underground groups prior to being killed, including the Hash-rebels. Both lived very short lives and their involvement in the movement can be described as short but intense.²²

In the late 1970's, members of the Anarchist Black Cross in Huddersfield were tried in what became known in the UK as "the Person's Unknown trial." Another ABC member in the UK, Phil Ruff, who was in prison due to armed robbery was soon accused of inciting a riot during the Gartree Prison Riots in 1978. Stuart Christie, mentioned earlier, continued to remain 'public enemy #1' in London and in Spain through the rest of the decade and was constantly under police harassment.²³

During the mid-1970's, member of the Irish Anarchist Black Cross, Noel and Marie Murray, took part in several armed actions throughout Dublin. In September 1975, during a robbery of the Bank of Ireland branch in Killester, Marie Murray shot and killed an off duty policeman who tried to intervene. Apparently, the police officer was sitting with his wife and child in a parked car outside of the branch when the anarchists ran out of the bank with 7,000 pounds. The police officer ran after the anarchists and was shot in the process. Both were given the death sentence but were later commuted.²⁴

The Present Wave

In 1979, Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin an anarchist political prisoner in the US issued a "Draft Proposal for an ABC Network" in hopes that it could build a movement to assist anarchist political prisoners. He believed that the ABC should be a united mass movement rather than individual collectives. This proposal put out by Ervin influenced the growth of the Anarchist Black Cross well into the 1980's and 1990's. Despite Ervin's call for a Network of ABC's, this kind of organization never emerged among all the ABC groups in the 1980's. But by 1989, movement in the ABC community began to be seen with the establishing of the "Emergency Response Network" (ERN). This was organized to respond to political raids, crackdowns, death sentences, hunger strikes, torture or killings of members of or communities that the ABC groups worked with. An ERN mobilization meant that ABC groups and others around the world would send telegrams and/or phone calls, organize demonstrations or other actions within 48 hours of the network being alerted. Sadly much wasn't done with this and the Emergency Response Network faded away.

²¹ Baumann, Bommi. How It All began. pg 93-103

²² Tom Vague, The Red Army Faction 1963-1993. pg 42-43

²³ Black Flag: Organ Of The Anarchist Black Flag. Volume 5, Number 7, 1978

²⁴ Times. December 21, 1979

In the early 1990's, although few ABC groups who still continued to maintain solid support work, the concept of a united ABC front never materialized. ABC groups seemed to work in multiple areas and there was little common focus or unity. This resulted in a weak support system for any political prisoner found within the prison systems. In 1994, a conference of Anarchist Black Cross organizations was held to discuss matters concerning political prisoners support and once again the ERN was set up.

One year later, four ABC groups got together to form the Anarchist Black Cross Federation. (New Jersey, Bronx, Washington DC, Brew City) Other groups would soon enter into the picture but less than a year later, issues of direction and goals of the Federation would cause a split in the organization. Those leaving the ABCF would soon create the ABCC (Anarchist Black Cross Confederation), but this organization would not last more than a couple of years. The ABCF, however, has since continued, reaching its 7th year and plans to continue for many years to come. Other networks emerged such as the Raze the Walls Network which was very successful for a number of years but seemed to disappear around 1998–1999. Remnants of it can still be seen in with the Raze the Walls in Seattle, Washington. Networks in Europe, such as the one in Poland, have recently emerged within the last couple of years and seem to have a very bright future. And Even a more recent creation has been the Anarchist Black Cross Network coming out of Texas and a few other sporadic places.

So as we can see, the history of this organization is far from a myth, folklore or fairy tale. The history is easily uncovered, if one has the patience and desire to search for that information. As I said before, this is only a small portion of the history that has been discover by just a handful of folks. We are sure that if more people began the search, more information will be discovered. More information will be put out by our group regarding ABC history. We welcome the assistance and aid of anyone interested in searching for the past of the ABC.

As for the title of this piece, Boris Yelensky was a man who for over five decades dedicated his life to political prisoners throughout the world. He fought tirelessly for his fallen comrades and is a man who should not be lost within the pages of history. Nor is he a man whose work should be forgotten or discredited as myth or folklore. He should be remember and respected as one who has come before us; one who has helped pave the way.

Boris Yelensky, once wrote, "The work is not done for the glory, but because we believe in Mutual Aid." We must take these words to heart and must continue our work in that spirit. Sadly, too many view the work in a competitive and absolutist manner. We allow our egos and pride to get in the way of concrete and solid support for those who have sacrificed so much.

We are always reminded by the words of Ojore Lutalo (New Afrikan anarchist political prisoner currently held in Trenton State prison) when he wrote, "Any movement that does not support its political internees is a shame movement." It is for these reasons that we must continue to support all political prisoners. Free All Political Prisoners!!

Work Cited

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