

Anarchism in Russia

Nick Heath

2009

Contents

References And Suggested Readings	5
---------------------------------------------	---

Despite the fact that two of the most important theoreticians of anarchism, Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin, were Russian, anarchism in that country never really developed as a movement until after the beginning of the twentieth century. Whilst Bakunin made strenuous efforts to recruit among Russian exiles, no credible organization modeled on his ideas emerged in the home country during his lifetime.

Zemfir C. Ralli-Arbore (aka Z. K. Ralli, 1848–1933), a young Romanian born in Bessarabia within the Russian empire and an associate of Bakunin, set up a small group in Geneva, the Revolutionary Commune of Russian Anarchists, in 1873, but it was not until 1892 that Armenian doctor Alexander Atabekian (1868–ca. 1940), an associate of Kropotkin, established a group called the Anarchist Library. This group smuggled literature into Russia with very few short-term results. At the end of the 1890s, the Geneva Group of Anarchists took up this work again.

Unrest within the Russian empire in 1903 led to the establishment of the first viable anarchist grouping in Bialystok. This group, Bor'ba (Struggle), was composed of mainly Jewish young workers and students, disillusioned with what they saw as the gradualism of the Bund, the Jewish Social Democratic grouping, the Socialist Revolutionaries, and the Polish Socialist Party. Meanwhile, young associates of Kropotkin established the paper *Khleb I Volia* (Bread and Freedom) in Geneva, and it was smuggled across the borders into the empire. Yiddish anarchist papers from London also began to circulate in the Jewish Pale.

One of the principal architects of the nascent movement was Nikolai Rogdaev (ca. 1880–1932), who constructed groups in Briansk, Nezhin, and Ekaterinoslav and acted as a coordinator between many groups in Russia and the Ukraine. In 1903, there were 12 organizations in 11 towns; in 1904, 29 groups in 27 centers of the northwest, southwest, and south; in 1905, 125 groups and federations in 110 towns; in 1906, 221 in 155 towns; and in 1907, at the height of the movement, there were 255 groups in 180 localities. The most important centers of the movement were in Bialystok, Odessa, and Ekaterinoslav, but anarchist activity could be found in three-quarters of the empire.

Anarchists turned quickly to armed attacks, not just against the servants of tsarist autocracy but also against factory owners and their managers involved in lockouts and severe repression of workers. Heavily involved in the events of 1904–5, they were the most committed fighters on the barricades during the Moscow uprising of December 1905. Many hundreds of anarchists died in the fighting or were hanged or died in prison in the aftermath.

A new current, rejecting expropriations and individual terror, and arguing for mass agitation among the workers and the organization of revolutionary unions, began to develop. The principal theorist of this anarchosyndicalist current was Daniil Novomirskii (aka Iakov Kirillovskii, 1882–after 1936), whose South Russian Group of Anarchosyndicalists had some success among workers in Odessa and Ekaterinoslav between 1905 and 1907.

While there were still 108 groups within the empire in 1908, by 1914, only seven remained. Many anarchists were forced into exile. A number of unitary conferences took place, the first in Geneva in 1908 where the groups around the papers *Khleb I Volia* and *Burevestnik* (Storm Petrel) fused and formed the Union of Anarchist Communists. At one of the last of these conferences (London, December 1913) the decision was taken to form a Federation of Anarchist-Communist Groups in Exile with its own paper. These moves were thwarted by the outbreak of war and the acrimonious splits that resulted from the decision of Kropotkin and others to support the Allies. Nonetheless, by 1915, the movement at home had begun to grow again to around 250–300,

mostly in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other urban centers, composed mostly of workers and a few students.

The February Revolution of 1917 led to the freeing of many hundreds of anarchists from prison, soon reinforced by many others returning from exile. While this further galvanized a movement that had already started growing as a result of the war, February was a great disappointment to the anarchists, who now were moving into a loose working relationship with their main rival, the Bolsheviks, to overthrow Kerensky's provisional government. In Moscow, anarchists expropriated many mansions of the rich and published two daily papers with 60 affiliated groups. There was a similarly strong following in Petrograd, where the anarchists were a moving force in the July Days, an abortive attempt to overthrow the provisional government. Both the anarchocommunists and anarchosyndicalists engaged in intense propaganda.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the consolidation of Bolshevik power in 1918 soon brought the anarchists into confrontation with their erstwhile allies. The Bolsheviks launched armed attacks on anarchists in Moscow, closing down anarchist papers. This wave of repression continued through the next two years.

In the Ukraine, the anarchist Nestor Makhno had begun organizing a peasant insurrection, first against the Austro-Germans, then against the Whites. Some anarchists from the urban centers began to join this movement, in part because of Bolshevik repression there. The Nabat Confederation of Anarchists was founded, working alongside Makhno's insurrectional army. To the east, in Siberia, anarchists began to organize armed bands against the Whites. Both these movements soon clashed with Bolshevism, leading to their repression. The culminating point was the Kronstadt Revolt of 1921. Kropotkin's funeral was to be the last main manifestation of anarchism in Russia for many years.

Those who did not become Soviet anarchists (either outright embracing of the Communist Party or fellow-traveling) were driven into exile. Many did not have this choice and were either murdered by the Bolsheviks or suffered many years in prisons or camps. As the French anarchist Louis Mercier Vega (1914–77) noted: "In most of the eyewitness accounts of the prisons and camps the anarchists feature, intractable, attached to their convictions, hard like pebbles polished by cruelty and bad treatment." There appears to have been some anarchist involvement in the uprising at the Siberian slave labor camp of Vorkuta in 1953, with the black flag flying.

In exile, some anarchists like Makhno and Arshinov began to argue that the failure of anarchism in Russia was due to chronic disorganization. Whilst anarchism had widespread sympathy there, it had failed to take advantage of this and had succumbed to its Bolshevik rival. There was heated and acrimonious debate over this in exile circles.

Anarchist groups began to appear in the 1980s and 1989 saw the establishment of the Confederation of Anarchosyndicalists (KAS), with groups across Russia. Today, several small and divided anarchist groupings exist in Russia: KRAS (the Russian section of the International Workingmen's Association, IWA), Autonomous Action (AD), and the Association of Anarchist Movements (ADA). Putin's Russia has not been a favorable environment for the growth of anarchism, and there is much ideological confusion within anarchist ranks.

SEE ALSO: Anarchism, Poland ; Anarchocommunism ; Anarchosyndicalism ; Bakunin, Mikhail Alexandrovich (1814–1876) ; Bolsheviks ; Kronstadt Mutiny of 1921 ; Kropotkin, Peter (1842–1921) ; Makhno, Nestor (1889–1935) ; Nechaev, Sergei (1847–1882) ; Russia, Revolution of 1905–1907 ; Russia, Revolution of February/March 1917 ; Russia, Revolution of October/November 1917 ; Soviet Union, Fall of

References And Suggested Readings

- Avrich, P. (Ed.) (1973) *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Avrich, P. (2005) *The Russian Anarchists*. Edinburgh: AK Press.
- Maksimov, G. P. (1999) *Syndicalists in the Russian Revolution*. Los Angeles: ICC.
- Rabinowitch, A. (1991) *Prelude to Revolution*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Skirda, A. (2000) *Les Anarchistes russes, les soviets et la révolution de 1917*. Paris: Editions de Paris.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Nick Heath
Anarchism in Russia
2009

Heath, Nick. "Anarchism, Russia." In *The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest: 1500 to the Present*, edited by Immanuel Ness, 141–143. Vol. 1. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

theanarchistlibrary.org