

The British Anarchist Movement and the Russian Revolution

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The extreme left and the anarchists in Britain welcomed the October Revolution of 1917 with enthusiasm. In fact, reportage in the press in Western Europe often made it out to be an anarchist revolution. As a result there was confusion over the true nature of this Revolution. The Bolshevik slogan "All Power To The Soviets" was taken at face value though one of the first to criticise the October Revolution was the deaf-mute anarchist Leonard Motler in the paper he helped edit, the anarchist monthly *Satire*. He wrote in December 1917 that: "The Russian Revolution is running a-gley(1). These little things happen when the people permit new rulers to pose as their saviours, instead of saving themselves by running the country on their own".

However the vast majority of the revolutionary left in Britain, anti-parliamentary communists, revolutionary syndicalists and anarchists interpreted the Russian Revolution in a sovietist or councilist sense until fresh information began to filter through in 1920. It was then that doubts began to emerge.

The anarchist Guy Aldred edited the paper *The Spur*. This was not the voice of one particular organisation, but expressed the views of various revolutionary groups around Britain. The most important of these was the Glasgow Anarchist Group (GAG) which could trace its origins back to a series of propaganda groups starting in the 1890s.

In 1920 The GAG changed its name to the Glasgow Communist Group in order to show solidarity with what it perceived as the Russian Revolution and as a token of unity with similar developments among other revolutionary groups in Britain. However, as we shall see, it soon had doubts about the tactics that Lenin and the Bolsheviks attempted to foist upon the Western European revolutionary movement. Another important organisation was the Workers Socialist Federation (WSF) based mainly in London which had grown out of suffragette activity around the East London Federation of Suffragettes led by Sylvia Pankhurst. In 1916 the name was changed to the Workers Suffrage Federation and then the Workers Socialist Federation. It developed an anti-parliamentary line, and included many revolutionary syndicalists, anarchists and anti-parliamentary communists. Its paper was *The Workers Dreadnought*. Indeed the above-mentioned Leonard Motler was one of those who wrote for the *Dreadnought*. Another anarchist associated with the *Workers Dreadnought* and the WSF was the Italian anarchist Silvio Corio, who became Sylvia Pankhurst's long-time companion. Yet another libertarian was the boiler

maker Harry Pollitt, at the time a close associate of the veteran anarchist James Tochatti. Pollitt was to become one of the historic leaders of the British Communist Party (!)

Like the GAG, the WSF initially supported the Bolsheviks. There were differences however between the approach of the GAG and The Spur on one hand and the WSF on the other. The former saw the October Revolution as the beginning of a world revolution, whilst the WSF saw it as a chance to end the War and to fight against intervention by the Allied powers.

The WSF firmly believed that workers were in control of Russia via the soviets or workers councils. However, in the initial phase workers would have to exercise a dictatorship of the proletariat, a view shared by Aldred and the Spur. In fact Aldred went further saying: 'those Anarchists who oppose the dictatorship of the proletariat as a transitional measure are getting dangerously near assisting the cause of the reactionaries, though their motives may be the highest. As a believer in the class struggle, I do not share their infatuation for abstract liberty at the expense of real social liberty.'

However by 1921 Pankhurst and the WSF had changed their tune. Writing in the Dreadnought in September 1921, Pankhurst was to remark on the 'drift to the Right in Soviet Russia, which has permitted the re-introduction of many features of Capitalism'. Pankhurst also noted 'strong differences of opinion amongst Russian Communists and throughout the Communist International as to how far such retrogression can be tolerated'.

The following year Pankhurst was arguing that there was antagonism between the workers and the industrial administrators. By July 1923 Pankhurst was writing that 'the term "dictatorship of the proletariat" has been used to justify the dictatorship of a party clique of officials over their own party members and over the people at large'. The Workers Dreadnought began to publish appeals from anarchists in Bolshevik prisons.

On the other hand, Freedom, the anarchist paper that had been founded by Kropotkin in 1888, was fairly quick to offer criticisms of the Russian Revolution. From 1919 onwards it carried appeals from imprisoned Russian anarchists. In January 1922 it published a letter from Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman about the treatment of Russian anarchists and how the Communist regime was portraying them as 'bandits'. In April of the same year Freedom published Berkman's 'Some Bolshevik Lies about the Russian Anarchists' which mainly dealt with the Makhnovists, whom Berkman defended at length.

Tom Keell and W.C. Owen, two editors of Freedom, spoke on July 27th 1923 at the meeting in London to defend Makhno, along with Sylvia Pankhurst. The meeting passed a unanimous resolution protesting Makhno's imprisonment and trial in Poland. Freedom reported on the meeting and that: "It is hoped that the publicity given to the case will stay the murderous hands of the reactionaries who seek to revenge themselves on this gallant fighter for freedom of the workers and peasants of the Ukraine". However Freedom's circulation was small and the anarchist movement in Britain was in decline. Matters were not helped by Aldred who continued to take an uncritical view of Russia long after other anarchists had realised the grim truth. In 1923 Aldred criticised an article by Owen in Freedom and questioned his revolutionary credentials (Owen had taken part in the Mexican Revolution). In his new paper The Commune Aldred attacked Emma Goldman in December 1924, saying that her criticisms of the Bolsheviks were no different from White propaganda. He went further in April 1925 describing her as a "revolutionary scab" and "ex-Anarchist" and that she be "boycotted and condemned by every worker for her infamous associations. She is a traitor to Labour's struggle who should be 'fired' with enthusiasm- from each and every proletarian assembly".

He published a letter from the ex-anarchist and pro-Bolshevik Robert Minor on the Russian Anarchists in November 1920, with a slur that the Makhnovists refusal to go to the Polish front might have led to the defeat of the Red Army by the Poles. In June 1924 Aldred attacked Makhno writing that he: “proves his revolutionary heroism to-day by serving as a general in the Polish White guards, a tool of French reaction”. This was responded to in the July-August edition of Freedom. Emma Goldman had been contacted in Berlin about this slur and she was quoted as saying: “As to Makhno being in the employ of the Polish white Guard or French reaction, that is all a repetition of the outrageous defamation’s spread from Moscow...His sterling honesty and his revolutionary zeal are beyond such defamation’s as repeated by Guy Aldred”.

Aldred did at least publish letters and communiques from Russian anarchists about their predicament but remained sceptical, writing that “We want the truth. The cry of ‘Safeguarding the revolution’ may be used as an excuse for tyranny. The cry of ‘Anarchism and liberty’ may conceal a counter-revolutionary conspiracy. We want to cut through phrases and get down to facts”. Aldred had also published a series of articles by the Austrian anarchist Rudolf Grossmann (Pierre Ramus) in September 1919, tearing into the Russian Communist regime, though he and his associates treated these articles with disbelief.

In a typical turnabout Aldred had drastically changed his mind by November of 1925. Writing on the eighth anniversary of the Revolution Aldred spoke of “our comrades rotting in the Soviet prisons” and “our persecuted comrades in Russia”.

If Aldred and his group had finally understood the true nature of the Soviet system, with mounting evidence of the persecution of opponents of the Communists and the real nature of workers’ and peasants’ conditions this was more than could be said about the anarchist veteran Fred Charles. A member of the Socialist League alongside William Morris back in the 1880s, Charles had become involved in practically every aspect of the socialist, anarchist and workers’ movements throughout the course of the years. He was an uncritical supporter of the Bolsheviks from the beginning and wrote in their favour in the pages of Freedom. He maintained these illusions to the end. He went on a trip to Russia, as a delegate of and financed by the Whiteway colony in Gloucestershire to which he had retired in the 1920s (the Whiteway Colony had been set up by Tolstoyans and many anarchists had moved there). He returned singing the praises of the Soviet Union. Thus a man who continued to describe himself as an anarchist communist was to say at a meeting at Whiteway that: “ In all my lifetime I have dreamed dreams of what this our earth might become, what the future might be, and now I have seen the beginning in Soviet Russia and am content to depart “. He was to remain with these illusions until his death in 1934.

The formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920 drew in many anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists like Polllitt, Willie Gallagher, Henry Sara and Robert Selkirk. If Pankhurst and her group joined this new Party, they were soon in trouble because of their continued anti-parliamentarism which clashed with Lenin’s policies on the obligatory use of parliament and support for the Labour Party! She refused to hand over control of the Workers Dreadnought and was expelled in 1921. She then set up the short-lived Communist Workers Party, which adopted a council communist line.

Aldred refused to join the Communist Party because of his anti-parliamentarism. He was thus in the peculiar position of supporting the Soviet Union whilst being opposed to Lenin’s position on parliament and the Labour Party. As a result the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation (APCF) was formed in Easter 1921 although it never really expanded outside of Scotland. Aldred left the APCF in 1933. In many ways the APCF was an unstable alliance of those who accepted

Anarchist Communist views and those who took a Council Communist position. Aldred and Co. still kept up illusions in the Russian Revolution up till 1924, flirting with the newly emergent Trotskyism for a while and launching attacks on Anarchist individuals and groups. As one member of the APCF in Leicester remarked in a letter to the editor of Freedom in 1924, Aldred was “running with Communism and hunting with Anarchism”. The anarchist elements within the APCF were to be strengthened and encouraged by the Spanish Revolution but that is another story.

Revolutionaries in Britain based their positions on information coming either from Bolshevik or White sources and very little information from other sources was available. The Bolsheviks were able through the apparent success of the Russian Revolution and their funding of British revolutionary groups to turn a movement that was virulently opposed to both the Labour Party and the use of parliament into its complete opposite. The result of this, the Communist Party of Great Britain, rapidly became increasingly bolshevised. The development of a genuinely revolutionary movement in Britain had been put back for many decades and we are still suffering the consequences of this in Britain today.

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