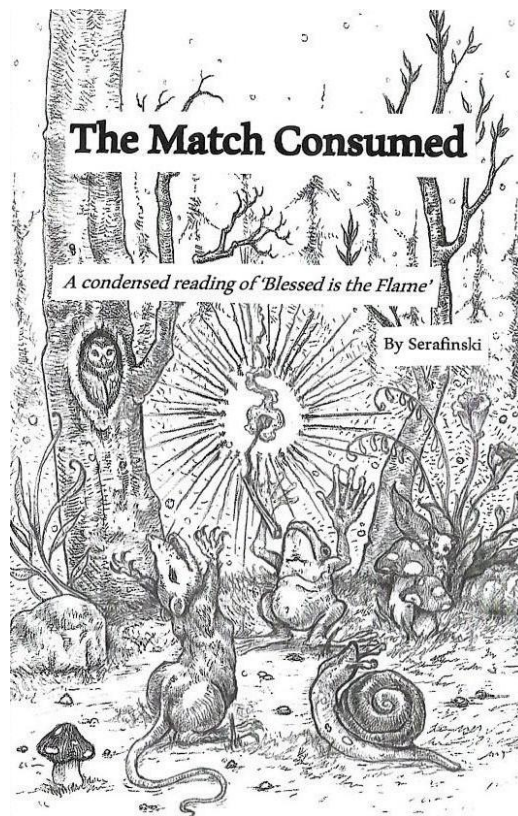


The Match Consumed

A Condensed Reading of “Blessed is the Flame”

Tal & Skinny



2023/12/06

Contents

Preface	3
Introduction	4
Anarcho-Nihilism	4
Absolute Subjugation	5
Precluding Resistance	5
Conditions for Resistance	6
Sabotage and Pure Negation	7
Jouissance	8
Spontaneous resistance & time	9
Spontaneous Resistance in the Lagers	9
Lager-time, Despondency, and Timelessness	10
Anarchy-nihilism, progressivism & futurity	10
Messianic Time	11
Anarcho-Nihilist Critique of Organizations	12
Anarcho-Nihilism and Informal Organizing	13
Cruel Optimisms	14
Insurrectionary Memories	15
The Void	16

Blessed is the match consumed
in kindling flame.
Blessed is the flame that burns
in the secret fastness of the heart.
Blessed is the heart with strength to stop
its beating for honor's sake.
Blessed is the match consumed
in kindling flame.
—Hannah Senesh,
Jewish partisan fighter.
And may the flame that
burns inside us
burn everything around us.
—Panayiotis Argyrou,
Proud Member of the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire.

Preface

“In writing an overview of both anarcho-nihilist thought and concentration camp resistance, I have omitted much. The nihilist themes of negation, time, and organization could have happily been joined by conversations about identity abolishment, queerness, domestication, and more. Stories of Häftlinge who lashed back against the camp systems could have been elaborated by countless stories of escape, mutual aid, and nonviolent civil disobedience, all of which played a part in the broader story of resistance in the Lagers. There are many questions and topics that still remain unexplored for me.”

Serafinski, Afterthought from *Blessed is the Flame*

A few months ago a comrade & I decided to take on the task of creating a condensed version of *Blessed is the Flame*. This was in response to a vast misunderstanding & fash jacketing of those who post content on nihilist thought.

This task turned out to be more difficult than we imagined. Condensing 50+ pages wasn't easy, at times it felt wrong to even omit some of the passages/stories from the book. On a particular night of working on this project the question came up of whether or not this was a disservice to all the people who's stories were told in the book. But we found solace in the 'Afterthoughts'.

There will never be enough paper to document all the stories of those who were imprisoned in the camps. Many of them are still relatively unknown & majority of the ones that are, ended in tragedy. Most of the prisoners who resisted were met with swift death. So knowing all the tragedy and suffering that happened — how did this book become so important to us?

Enough for us to spend months trying to compile a shorter read for people to have access to?

Blessed was our introduction to nihilist resistance. On a summer morning in the middle of the desert it became a sacred text to us. We poured over the pages, read & re read each section — the stories lit a fire under us. When you pick this up its our hope that you may be consumed by that same fire.

“I find it comforting that everything is so hopeless”

-Tal & Skinny

Introduction

We are being led to our slaughter. This has been theorized in a thousand ways, described in environmental, social, and political terms, it has been prophesied, abstracted, and narrated in real time, and still we are unsure of what to do with it. The underlying point is that the progressivity of society has nothing to offer us and everything to take away. Often it feels like we are giving it away without a fight: when we sell our time for money, allow our passions to be commodified, invest ourselves in the betterment of society, or sustain ourselves on the spoils of ecological destruction, we openly (though not consensually) participate in our own destruction.

The question hangs in an ethereal and ghastly voice: Why do you let yourselves be led to the slaughter like sheep?

Underneath the ubiquitous sheep-to-the-slaughter metaphor is buried a profound historical possibility: wherever the Nazis sought to impose domination and violence, people resisted. Behind the images of people wearing armbands, boarding trains, and walking placidly into gas chambers, lies a rich history of recalcitrance and insurrection.

A different approach: We have already been led to our slaughter — it is all around us. The world in which we exist is a protracted death, a sort of economically-sustained limbo in which hearts are permitted to beat only to the extent that they can facilitate the upward stream of capital. The plague of domestication has reached into every wild space, and the lines of colonization have crossed us more times than we can count. Every unproductive aspect of the biosphere has been flagged for eradication, from the “beam-trawled ocean floors” to the “dynamited reefs” to the “hollowed-out mountains,” the highest calibers of technology are locked into a perpetual killing spree chugging along in a “monotonous rhythm of death.” We who still have air in our lungs are the living dead, and struggle daily to remember what it feels like to be alive, holding tightly to the “desire for wildness that the misery of a paycheck cannot allay.” We roam the desolate architecture of our slaughter houses (“the prison of civilization we live in”) like ghosts who feel but cannot quite understand the vapidity of our existence. To borrow some apt phrases from the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire (CCF): we have become thoroughly integrated into “a system that crushes us on a daily basis”, that “controls our thoughts and our desires through screens” and “teaches us how to be happy slaves” while letting us “consider ourselves free because we can vote and consume”, and all the while, “we, like cheerful Sisyphus, are still carrying our slavery stone and think this is life.

Then perhaps a better question might be: Why are we continuously being led to our slaughter like sheep?, to which many of us simply reply: We aren’t.

Anarcho-Nihilism

“A nihilist is a person who does not bow down to any authority, who does not accept any principle on faith, however much that principle may be revered.” — Ivan Turgenev

The anarcho-nihilist position is essentially that we are fucked. That the current manifestation of human society (civilization, leviathan, industrial society, global capitalism, whatever) is beyond salvation, and so our response to it should be one of unmitigated hostility. There are no demands to be made, no utopian visions to be upheld, no political programs to be followed — the path of resistance is one of pure negation.

After two centuries of failed revolutions, nihilism has perhaps become even more disinterested in conventional socialist programs and radical milieus. It has also been armed with decades of anarchist and post-structuralist theory that have helped to cultivate its critiques of domination, meta-narratives, teleological structures, gender, and civilization as a whole.

Though some strains of nihilism certainly arrive at a place of paralysis, the strain that collides with anarchism tends to be one of explosive creativity and relentless action. On the path of negation, anarcho-nihilism spurns positive programs for social change, challenges dominant modes of time, and discovers a tactical freedom by disregarding inherited moralities and political traditions, among other positions.

Absolute Subjugation

“Nobody knows themselves. Sometimes when somebody is really nice to me I find myself thinking, ‘How will he be in Sobibor?’” — Toivi Blatt

The camps were “designed to break the will of the inmate”, to “shatter the adversaries’ capacity to resist”, and as one survivor of Auschwitz wrote: “it would have been impossible to create worse conditions for resistance, a more perverse and brutal system.” The camps were so ordered against resistance that merely to lift one’s hand in defense of an incoming blow was considered a grievous act of defiance, worthy of torturous execution.

The totality of this subjugation is conveyed in the crushing testimonies of those who experienced it: Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel listened to his own father cry out for him while being beaten to death, yet was unable to muster a response. Filip Müller painfully watched as 4,000 Auschwitz inmates knowingly walked into the gas chambers despite the prolonged efforts of some to agitate them into resistance. These testimonies are powerful gestures towards the depravity of the “concentration universe” and the extent to which it violently precluded the potential for defiance. These are not stories of individual passivity — they are stories of systematic disempowerment.

Precluding Resistance

Throughout survivor testimonies, starvation is the most frequently cited obstacle to resistance. One survivor of the Warsaw ghetto, Marek Edelman, annoyed with perpetual questions about the passivity of those who boarded trains bound for death camps, explained to his interviewer: “Listen... do you have any idea what bread meant at the time in the Ghetto? Because if you don’t, you will never understand how thousands of people could voluntarily come for the bread and go on to the camp at Treblinka. Nobody has understood thus far.”

Another central aspect of the camps that devastated potential for resistance was the Nazi strategy of cultivating social alienation, intended “to reduce all inmates to monads.” By creating

conditions that demanded brute self-interest, where groups and individuals were pitted against each other for scraps of privilege, where the pain of isolation was preferable to the weight of empathy, the Nazis were able to preclude the capacity for solidarity, and thus the capacity for much resistance. The arbitrary organization of these identity categories into a violently enforced hierarchy defined social life in the Lagers, and served to undermine solidarity between inmates. Because these identity categories came to be so internalized and cherished by the inmates, connections between inmates were inherently governed by Nazi strategy. Beneath these in the hierarchy were other “prominent” positions that offered opportunities for non-lethal labor, extra food rations, or other privileges. Overall, the internal hierarchy of the camp fostered an atmosphere of brutal mistrust, competition, and resentment. Across the entire system of camps it was universally true that Jews held the lowest rung. For them there were generally no prominent positions available or privileges to be earned; for them there was only death and the hostility and resentment of those around them for the space they occupied, the food they consumed, and the hopelessness they represented. As Joseph Garlinski describes the Jews’ situation in Auschwitz, their horrid and short lives within the camps combined with their multilingual, multinational makeup as a group, “limited any possibility of clandestine work among [them] and decreased the chances of their forming a strong underground group in the camp.”

These assaults on the body and mind were combined with a relentless war on the spirit; demoralization was a daily responsibility of the Capos and the SS, who used humiliation, misinformation, and extreme isolation to obliterate any sense of agency. Lastly, daily life within the camps was intended to overwhelm and disempower the inmates with cruel, often bizarre and inscrutable laws and practices. Primo Levi informs us that the rules governing life in the camps were “infinite and senseless,” in addition to the guidelines around work, which were themselves “a Gordian knot of laws, taboos, and problems.” These irrational elements of Nazi control created an environment in which, as one German guard explained to Levi: “hier ist kein warum” — there is no why here. The innumerable strange and contradictory aspects of camp life reinforced the absoluteness of Nazi control, and further obliterated the agency and morale of the inmates.

Conditions for Resistance

For those few individuals who were able (and lucky enough) to survive these conditions and maintain both the will and physical capacity to resist, an entirely new world of complications and obstacles awaited. One of the most debilitating mechanisms employed by the SS to discourage resistance was a policy of “collective responsibility,” whereby any act of revolt, sabotage, or escape was met with brutal punishment, not only for those involved, but for an arbitrary selection of other inmates. Before entering the front gates, a prisoner was chosen at random and told to run to a post at the side of the road — “Ten men were then dragged out of the ranks at random and shot with pistols as ‘collective responsibility’ for the ‘escape,’ which the SS themselves has staged.” These policies deeply complicated any acts of resistance for obvious ethical reasons, and resulted in some resistance groups implementing a ‘no-escape’ policy to prevent such outlandish retributions.

Another impediment that awaited would-be resisters was the Nazi’s prized networks of informants. The Political Department of the SS maintained elaborate webs of snitches (called “Special Commissions”) throughout each camp, which were all too easy to establish within the internally

hostile and competitive social fabric. Other inmates became snitches of their own initiative in hopes of currying favour or privilege.

In spite of these and a host of other factors that destroyed almost any possibility of resistance, we are nevertheless faced with a rich history of sabotage, insurrection, mutual aid, escape, spontaneous defiance, and underground organization within the camps. Resistance organizations even managed to mitigate the impacts of the Special Commissions by developing security cultures that were nearly impenetrable. They functioned in such secrecy that “even in camps where a resistance organization was active for years, the overwhelming majority of prisoners knew nothing about it.” Informants were frequently killed by rebels, through mock trials in hidden rooms, swift force, or covert assassination. In one case, castor oil was put into an informant’s soup, and when admitted to the hospital he was given a lethal injection by a doctor who was part of the resistance. The best-known Gestapo informer in Auschwitz was given a sweater containing typhus-infected lice that killed him within weeks. And, despite the most brutal torture methods employed by the SS, members of the resistance seem to have rarely snitched on each other after being caught: phrases such as “however, he gave no one away,” and “the interrogation proved fruitless” are repeated frequently throughout the literature. For all of us who have witnessed our own resistance networks stifled by state surveillance, interpersonal conflict, hopelessness, and the material strain of keeping food on the table, the Lagers provide proof that even in the most overwhelming situations people can still find creative and sustained ways to fight back. While much could be said on specific definitions of resistance, in the realm of concentration camps, I tend to agree with the broadest definitions offered: “Everything could be treated as resistance because everything was prohibited. Any activity which created the impression that the prisoner had retained some of his former personality and individuality was an act of resistance.”

Activities such as mutual aid, individual escape, charity, friendship, medical aid, cultural contributions (religious gatherings, education, sports, music, etc.), refusal of work, saving lives, and communication with the outside world all represent invaluable acts of resistance in a situation that fostered selfishness and subjugation. It is my hope that within each act of concentration camp resistance, we can find a simmering spirit of anarcho-nihilism and an opportunity to deepen our understanding of what it might mean for us to resist despite overwhelming feelings of futility.

Sabotage and Pure Negation

While much of the work assigned to inmates early in the war was intended solely as punishment (e.g. moving bags of sand back and forth), after the spring of 1942, the camps became a prime source of slave labour for nearby factories that supplied German army. Using a wide array of creative approaches, some more blunt than others, the inmates were able to botch their jobs, demonstrating to the Germans that slavery is simply not a reliable source of quality labor. Many of these acts were spontaneous, while others were part of organized campaigns; all were geared towards the pure negation of Nazism. It is not the outcome of the act, but the moment of action itself that speaks loudest here. For many, the opportunity to step outside of the role of victim for even a fleeting moment, the chance to hit back in whatever way possible, outweighed the risks of such actions.

The nihilist concepts of negation and *jouissance* resonate deeply with these acts of sabotage, offering a framework through which we might think about acts of resistance not as a means of

liberation, but as acts of liberation in themselves. Like any act of resistance, sabotage within the camps and factories was an incredibly risky venture. The SS pursued a number of strategies to prevent and dissuade anything that would get in the way of seamless production and orderly labour lines. The crudest strategy was of course blunt violence: anyone who even raised suspicions of sabotage was met with swift and brutal repercussions.

Despite these bloody efforts, there were “reports from practically all camps about acts of sabotage by inmates forced to work on the production of weapons, and it is certain that many acts went unrecorded.” Fliers spread throughout occupied Europe with the phrase “Work Slow” tagged across an image of a turtle, while slogans were developed within camps to further spread this mentality, such as Buchenwald’s, “Whoever works more slowly will reach peace more quickly,” or Sachsenhausen’s less catchy, “Work slowly, produce substandard articles, waste materials, cause machines to break down.”

The call from Bakunin to embrace the destructive urge forms the backbone of both anarchist and anarcho-nihilist thought. This stands in direct contrast to other anarchist tendencies that place at least some emphasis on “positive programs” — aspirations to construct something ideal in the present world or to craft plans in preparation for the downfall of the current system. Anarchonihilism understands the positive program as “one that confuses desire with reality and extends that confusion into the future” by either making promises about what a revolutionary future might hold, or attempting to bring those conditions about from within the existing order.

Such positive aspirations offer nothing more than a dangling carrot for us to pursue in a situation in which the stick, string, and prize all need to be destroyed. Aragoml writes: “Nihilism states that it is not useful to talk about the society you ‘hold in your stomach’, the things you would do ‘if only you got power’...What is useful is the negation of the existing world.” The visions that rebels tend to entertain about what life will be like After The Revolution are not only unproductive, they are dangerous because they presume that a unified vision of life is desirable. Nihilism urges us to consider the fact that such forward planning is simply unnecessary and that it obfuscates our more urgent goal of negation: “There’s no need to know what’s happening tomorrow to destroy a today that makes you bleed.”

Our riots are justified not because we contribute, but because we exist under the heel of a monstrous society. Positive projects are the means of surviving within that order; negation is the project of destroying it completely. As Alejandro de Acosta reminds us, we must not be tempted to “frame destructive action as having any particular goal beyond destruction of the existent.”

Jouissance

Despite its gloomy connotations, the commitment to pure negation finds its most interesting manifestations as a joyful, creative, and limitless project. Most notably, Bæden utilizes the French word *jouissance*, which directly translates to “enjoyment,” but takes on a variety of connotations related to “uncivilized desire,” those aspects of our existence which “escape representation,” a ‘shattering of

identity and law,” and that which “shatters our subjective enslavement to capitalist civilization. It is “the process that momentarily sets us free from our fear of death” and which manifests as a “blissful enjoyment of the present,” or a ‘joy which we cannot name.’ It is the visceral experience of negation as ecstatic liberation. Without expectations of the world to come, without deference

to moral code, and without adherence to a right way to do things, nihilism embraces the act of resistance as a goal in itself. Through this lens, the joy of pissing in a Nazi rocket cannot easily be measured against its risks or results — in jouissance, we find a richness of life unattainable under the status quo. ‘Neither victory nor defeat is important, but only the beautiful shining of our eyes in combat.’

Spontaneous resistance & time

One of the connections that jumped out at me early on in my research was a continuous reference to time in both anarcho-nihilist and holocaust literature. The concept of ‘futura/ the sense that one has a future under the existing order, threads these subjects together and provokes a discussion about the radical possibilities of chronological rupture. Those who experienced a complete rupture of futurity in the camps (e.g. realized what the chimneys were for, gave up on allied liberation, etc.) often sunk into a grim and catatonic state, but in some instances they reacted ferociously. Inmates who physically confronted their oppressors were not engaged in a “rational political struggle for a better future,” but rather understood the futility of their situations and chose to fight back regardless.

Spontaneous Resistance in the Lagers

In Treblinka, on August 30, 1942, when a young Jewish man wasn’t permitted to say goodbye to his mother, he wrestled a knife from a Ukrainian guard and stabbed him. The man and everyone else on his transport was shot. On September 11, 1942, after watching his wife and child be selected for the gas chambers in Treblinka, Meir Berliner attacked an SS man with a knife, stabbing him to death and leaving the knife protruding from his back. Berliner and over a hundred of his fellow inmates were “cruelly killed.” On October 17, 1944, Hanna Lévy-Hass, an inmate of Bergen-Belsen whose diary survived the war, recorded that her camp was put on severe lockdown and that rumors had circulated about a women’s rebellion in the neighboring camp. The only evidence of this rebellion for Levy-Hass was the cessation of all regular camp activity and the glow of the crematorium, which operated nonstop throughout the night. Filip Muller tells a deeply disturbing story of a small group of Jewish families who, after hiding in dug-outs in southern Poland for four months, were discovered and brought to Birkenau to be killed. As in many other stories, one mother dedicated her final moments to comforting her infant daughter, even as they were led to a wall to be shot by a Nazi named Voss. Müller watched as the two performed a macabre dance: Voss circling trying to figure out where best to shoot the infant, while the mother reflexively turned to keep her daughter away from the barrel of the gun. Eventually Voss grew frustrated and shot the child three times. As he turned his gun on the mother, “she lost all selfcontrol and flung her daughter straight at her murderer’s head.” Stunned, Voss wiped the blood off of his face and dropped his gun, clearly unable to carry on. Another guard quickly took over and finished the job.

Lager-time, Despondency, and Timelessness

Liberation in these moments was not necessarily a material gain, but a fleeting lived experience; an existential reorientation from a relationship of domination to one of recalcitrance. Pure jouissance. Some of these attacks resonated widely outside of their perimeter and punctured holes in the Nazi facade of invulnerability, perhaps even inspiring others to fight back. Other attacks simply dissipated in a hail of gunfire. Regardless, each of them seem to defy any notion of hope or strategy, and the very fact that each story ends with a mass slaughter gestures towards a spirit of resistance that prioritized lived revolt over futurity.

For Häftlinge, this rupture involved breaking free from three states of chronological awareness: despondency, futurity, and a paralyzing suspension in the present.

For anarcho-nihilists, focus has centered largely on breaking free from progressive conceptions of time and false senses of futurity. In both realms, we find an insurrectionary potential that exists outside of dominant modes of time. Walter Benjamin's concept of "messianic time" will offer us a vocabulary to describe this transgression. In one sense, inmates were beckoned towards what we will call "Lager-time," which is the series of hoops and tribulations through which Nazis created the illusion of futurity, the promise of survival best encapsulated in the Auschwitz slogan "Freedom Through Work." This ongoing promise of futurity kept many inmates docile in a system that ultimately produced only two things — German wealth and corpses. For many, the abandonment of futurity simply meant despondency... the alternative to futurity was the suicidal allure of the electric fence, which offered an immediate escape from the horror of despondency. For those who did not succumb to despair, the key to survival lay within the tension between Lager-time and suicidal despondency. This experience involved the violent eradication of past and future, resulting in an unblinking commitment to survival in the present moment.

From Auschwitz:

Why worry oneself trying to read into the future when no action, no word of ours could have the minimum influence?... our wisdom lay in 'not trying to understand,' not imagining the future, not tormenting ourselves as to how and when it would all be over; not asking others or ourselves any questions.

Survival meant forgetting about your past life, abandoning thoughts of future liberation, and sinking deeply into the eternal present: "Survival meant thinking of today." In her diary from Bergen-Belsen, Hannah Lévy-Hass reflects on her inability to remember anything about her life before the camps: "The horror that surrounds us is so great that the brain becomes paralyzed and completely incapable of reacting to anything that doesn't stem directly from the nightmare we are presently living through and this is constantly before our eyes."

Anarchy-nihilism, progressivism & futurity

The reality is that the future never comes, but is rather the ideological justification for the suppression of our desires and revolutionary change today. Tomorrow becomes just the romantic notion of accepting subjugation today. —Bryan Hill Anarcho-nihilism is interested in the extent to which severing ourselves from dominant modes of time can open up incendiary possibilities. This involves dispelling the myth of progressivism, the idea that history is a linear story of progress, as well as the myth of reproductive futurity, the idea that what is best for future

generations is the continuance of the existing order. Because of the way these ideologies frame our relationship to time, they both prevent meaningful opportunities for negation now.

The myth that we are somehow moving forward forms the backbone of the socialist tradition.

Many anarchists have argued that this teleological framework is both ludicrous in its prophetic optimism, and stifling in its programmatic assertions (i.e. that our job is to find ways to advance society into a state of socialism). The progress of society is an illusion created by clever historians and propagandists, and the idea that somehow this historical train is locked into a track that leads to our shared liberation is both intoxicating and toxic.

Anarcho-nihilism replaces the program of historical acceleration with one of negation. Rather than moving ourselves quickly along the train tracks of history towards a socialist utopia, we must derail the train and rupture history altogether.

Like the trains bound for Auschwitz, this movement of history is heading nowhere good and needs to be sabotaged at every possible turn.

Whereas once this progressivism was the domain of bright-eyed revolutionaries, capitalism has seized the tradition, meaning that we are now assaulted with it from all angles — whether through austerity and democratic participation or through patient and restrained “movement building,” we are constantly being asked to tolerate intolerable conditions today in order to work towards a brighter future.

Messianic Time

What is to be gained by shattering the progressive conception of time or by abandoning our attachment to futurity? How can we conceive of the chronological mode embodied by those inmates who escaped Lager-time, despair, and suspension, and fought back? When the monotonous rhythms of society’s clocks have ceased and the death march of progress has been brought to a halt, messianic time is the space where new forms of life can be birthed. The CCF looks for this historical rupture in the moment of an attack against a system, and in the precious moments afterwards, before the system has turned its switches back on (e.g. after the riot, before the cleanup); these moments of “unstuck time” are where our desires for the impossible come to the surface, and “in these holes, negotiations against this world can be born.” This project of stopping time is an attempt to break free from the ideologies of progressivism and the spell of reproductive futurity, and to enter into combat with the existing order. Those in the camps who spontaneously fought back knowing that death would be the immediate consequence erupted out of oppressive, paralyzing, and illusory concepts of time, and entered into this space of messianic time.

Here I do not mean to argue that those who fought back in the Lagers experienced some mystical chronological transcendence that granted them supernatural bravery. Rather, I am pointing towards the possibilities that exist when we confront our own futurelessness and find the will to act: When we don’t believe the lies about where we’re heading, when we don’t sink into absolute despair about how fucked we are, and when we don’t just keep our heads down and think about the present moment — when we step out of that debilitating sequence and act against the existing order, no matter the odds. This often means confronting death, imprisonment, alienation, and a variety of other dangers. For the anarcho-nihilists, it also means opening oneself up to new possibilities of being alive. These cries to “stop time” and to discover *jouissance* are essentially asking

us to sever any attachments we have to the existing order, and to position ourselves outside of and against its progress.

So long as Häftlinge saw a future for themselves in the camps, or remained suspended in the present moment, or gave up on living completely, the Nazis would never have to deal with a moment of defiance. By shattering those chronological modes, some inmates broke with the rhythms of the camp and carved out a different fabric of time. Similarly, so long as we believe that this society is making progress, and so long as we can glimpse a future for ourselves within it or a future for our children, we will remain in some way wed to it. When anarcho-nihilism urges us to abandon those chronological modes, it is in essence asking us to sever all ties to the continuation of society and work instead to negate its existence. In this rupture of time we find a richness of life unimaginable within the existing order. Messianic time is the chronological awareness in which *jouissance* can flourish, for rather, than deferring our rage to the future we can finally realize that now *I* is the time we've been waiting for.

Anarcho-Nihilist Critique of Organizations

“Organizations, legislative bodies, and unions: Churches for the powerless. Pawnshops for the stingy and weak.” —Renzo Novatore, 1920

“By holding a stupid pistol, we have only taken one step in many for escaping from the alienation of “Now is not the moment” and “The times are not ripe.” —OLGA Cell
FAI/IRF

The anarcho-nihilist critique of organizations stems from a common frustration with the bureaucratic and managerial role of formal organizations in radical spaces. Though this frustration is not new in anarchism,] it has certainly seen a renewed, and perhaps more fierce articulation in recent years from both insurrectionary and nihilist voices. Many contemporary anarchists have sought to sever themselves completely from the model of formal organizations and to orient themselves towards more wild and joyous forms of coordinated action. One of the primary themes of this critique is the extent to which organizations tend to defer action until the emergence of a mass movement. Because nihilists seek the destruction of everything that comprises society, and because that aspiration will never be shared by a majority (or even a substantial portion) of the population, to wait for mass consensus is tantamount to defeat. The UK chapter of the Informal Anarchist Federation (FAI) writes: “With all the billions of people who live in the world, there will never be a time when a particular act against the State and Capital is felt by all or even the majority of people to be appropriate, good, or desirable.” Rather than spend our lives preparing for a mass awakening that likely will not happen, better to attack now and see where it takes us. (It is worth noting here a difference between “deferred” action and “patient” action, for in planning each of the bombings, shootings, and arsons that have defined the nihilist stance, a great deal of patience has indeed been required — let’s not mistake urgency for impatience.)

Thus, nihilism represents a strong anti-social turn in anarchism, whereby instead of working to mobilize the masses and build a wide-based movement, it prioritizes immediate attack rooted in individual desires. This “aristocratic contempt for the common people,” as critics have labeled it, severs nihilists from the task of rousing the “sheeple,” and allows for a different set of priorities.

Anarcho-Nihilism and Informal Organizing

“An informal anarchist organization flows like water and takes new forms according to the action it wants to carry out.” —Conspiracy of Cells of Fire, Imprisoned Members Cell

Because of the unique conditions of the extermination camps, longterm, formal organizations were an impossibility. What arose instead were informal conspiracies of inmates that had one shared ambition: insurrection. What they accomplished was nothing short of miraculous: the two most successful uprisings to occur in Nazi camps and the liberation of some of the only eye witnesses to the horrors of extermination camps. They did this without political allegiances, without bureaucracy, and without deferring to history’s fabled “ripe conditions.” Although the conspiracies that formed in Sobibór and Treblinka don’t necessarily reflect any sort of ‘ideal nihilist model’, they do resonate with the approach that anarchonihilists have taken toward organizing outside of conventional structures.

One of the aspects of anarcho-nihilism that makes this kind of informal organizing possible is the tactical freedom afforded by its rejection of all inherited programs, moralities, and expectations. It urges us to take ethical decisions into our own hands rather than appealing to any socially governed notions of right and wrong, thus opening up an infinite spectrum of tactical thinking that can more meaningfully interact with the particularities of our unique context. Experimentation, then, takes the place of formulaic thinking in revolutionary struggle: “Rather than organization, then, in the present we might simply speak of experimentation, as the willingness of small groups of people to gamble on these admittedly slim possibilities with absolutely no guarantee of success.” What we hope to find when we open up our field of vision like this is that anarchistic organizing doesn’t have to be a soul-sucking, bureaucratic affair; on the contrary, we might find that “we can organize ourselves, and that this capacity is fundamentally joyful.” An informal organization like the CCF (Conspiracy Cells of Fire) or RS allows space for individuals and affinity groups to act with unrestrained ferocity against systems of domination, while still being connected to a network of people who are interested in similar ideas and who can act in solidarity with each others’ struggles.

Though there is a great deal of nuance and complexity that should not be overlooked, the fact remains that the two most successful uprisings to occur in Nazi concentration camps happened in two of the only camps without formal organizations. This in itself should challenge anarchists and other radicals to deeply question the pragmatic function of organizations in our lives. While formal and sustained organizational methods can be useful for certain goals, we should remember that they are often structurally incapable of working towards moments of complete rupture. What they offer in terms of resources, visibility, and longevity, must be measured against the hurdles they often create between people and their Insurrectionary desires. ¶

That being said, while the informal organizational methods being experimented with by nihilists are exciting and have clearly facilitated a great deal of incendiary action, they also carry with them inevitable shortcomings and pitfalls, not least of which is the sort of solipsism that results in a Greenpeace office getting bombed. And though informal organizational models may be able to mitigate the problem of collective responsibility, they will never be able to fully solve the problem. Just as the authors of *Attentat* become paralyzed by the ‘horror show’ that would be required to violently confront the state, so too did the Fighting Group Auschwitz and other

concentration camp organizations attempt to navigate the tension between attacking a dominant order and the responses this would provoke. Ultimately somebody along the line is going to have to make shady ethical choices, regardless of organizational model. Thus, while I think that stories of concentration camp uprisings can help us to develop a healthy wariness around the role of organizations, we must also stay vigilant to nuance. There are no easy answers to these questions. Without dismissing (or attacking) every formal organization we encounter, we can continue to experiment with non-hierarchical organizational forms that might facilitate, rather than defer, moments of liberatory rupture.

Cruel Optimisms

“The Machine has fabricated a landscape in which even at the (depths of suffering it is less unpleasant to choose among the officially proffered options than to resist, to transgress, to fight back, to step out of line. The lessons of the Holocaust were well learned. We will walk through the very last door as long as it is the easiest of a well managed set of choices.” —Lev Zlodey & Jason Radega

“The ghetto was ruled by neither German nor Jew; it was ruled by delusion” —Elie Wiesel

In her book *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant dissects some of the reasons that human beings cling so tenaciously to hopeful ideas. She defines “cruel optimism” as “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic.” What makes these attachments cruel is not just the harmful impact of the object of desire, but the sense in which the object comes to provide something of “the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.” Without the object of our desire, we fall apart. Underneath of a cruel optimism is an existential abyss, and yet severing ourselves from it poses the only real possibility for growth. As Berlant writes: “Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies — say, of the enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work — when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?” In the Nazi camps, these cruel optimisms had a name: *paroles*, which referred to optimistic rumours that spread through the camps, usually about the war nearing an end or the partisans nearing the camp walls. The false sense of hope that such rumours offered was both a lifeline for desperate people, and a perpetual deterrent for resistance. What cruel optimisms might we be clinging to in our current situations?

Anarchism is fundamentally posed to challenge many cruel optimisms held by society, and anarchism is in turn having its own cruel optimisms challenged by nihilism. Nihilism is the incredulous voice whispering impossible questions: Are we toxically attached to the idea that we can build a new world in the shell of the old, despite overwhelming evidence that points towards the impossibility of that happening? Are we stuck in a model of time that binds us to the reproduction of society and endlessly defers incendiary action? Have we inherited a set of stagnant revolutionary models that serve only to limit the full spectrum of tactics available to us and to manage the rebellious desires that course through our bodies? Is all of our resistance predicated on the fantasy that we can actually bring an end to global capitalism?

For those in the Lagers, the dissolution of cruel optimisms was the most crucial step towards resistance. Immersed in a fog of misinformation, insidious lies, and unbearable truths, very few inmates managed to come to terms with the severity of their situations, and even fewer were able to muster the will (or had the luck/privilege/physical ability, etc) to act on those truths. Nihilism is the voice at the Warsaw Ghetto train station whispering, these trains are bound for an extermination center; it is the voice on the “Road to Freedom” whispering, these aren’t showers; it is the voice in the Lagers definitively proclaiming, “no one is going to save us”. Some of the truths that nihilism asks us to confront are almost as severe and unbelievable as the truth about the camps. Groups like the CCF and the FAI ask us to accept the possibility that the majority of human beings on this planet will never be motivated to resist oppression. The zine *Desert* asks us to accept that global climate change is unstoppable, and that, despite our best efforts, it will not result in the end of capitalism, patriarchy, or civilization as a whole. The authors of *Attentat* confront the grotesque possibility that meaningful social change is actually impossible in the current landscape, and that action is not even necessarily justified: Anything less complex than the spectacular, cybernetic, late capitalism of this world is hopelessly naive and simplistic. It would necessitate untold violence and brutality. It would tear asunder the illusions of two hundred years of humanistic, rights-based social organization... Practically, we don’t live in an era where utopian or even liberal (in the broadest sense of the word) political change is possible.

These are all grotesque ideas in that they force us to confront a situation without hope. The problem for many of us is that these ideas happen to resonate on a very deep level. We just don’t always know what to do with them.

Though we are certainly not obliged to accept every nihilist position that comes out of the woodwork (many of which are overly simplistic and loaded with brawny machismo), some of them are just impossible to ignore. Others, such as the idea that we should turn our backs on the positivist projects that sustain us and give us joy, can be wrestled with and taken for what they’re worth — perhaps a willingness to be honest about the limits of such projects. In other words, this isn’t about becoming a nihilist. Nihilism does not demand our allegiance, because it is not a political ideology. I am more inclined to look at it as a tendency in the true sense of the word, and to embrace it as a fluid presence in our lives that constantly asks us to negate our own ideologies, certainties, and optimistic attachments. I find any form of nihilism that gets used as an excuse not to dream, not to act, and not to engage earnestly with other people to be dull — I am interested in a nihilism that ravenously digs below the surface of commonly accepted ideas, and that can help us to ground our resistance in something more meaningful than tired slogans and listless strategies. I am interested in a nihilism that helps us to reorient our lives away from cruel optimisms and towards jouissance.

Insurrectionary Memories

“To remember the struggle in the present is to glimpse which road we have walked upon, to help understand where to place our next steps — this is to use insurrectionary memory to replant ourselves tactically and strategically in combat against the oppressive reality.” —Anonymous Chilean Anarchists

Reading holocaust literature is not easy work and I don’t blame people for turning away from it. Nearly every page of memoir brings with it a new layer of hellish imagery, trauma, and

misanthropic insight. I felt called to these stories for a number of personal reasons, and was motivated to keep reading when I started to glimpse the ways that they might be interesting to other anarchists. My experience of these stories became even richer when I started to realize that one of the most widespread and crushing fears for those who entered the camps was of not having their stories heard, of being forgotten by history. Primo Levi observed that the most commonly reported nightmare in the Lagers was not one of death or torture, but the alienation of clogged mouths and muted words. “Why,” he asked, “is the pain of every day translated so constantly into our dreams in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story?” With this in mind, reading diaries and memoirs becomes less of a dry historical excavation, and more of an interaction with those who staked their last shreds of energy on the hopes that they would not be forgotten. Because the Nazis worked so vigilantly to erase the Ballastexistenzen from history, to forget them would be “akin to killing them a second time.”

In remembering these voices, we also have the opportunity to carry on past struggles and to turn the stories of those who came before us into fodder against our oppressors. As we all know, history is written by the victors, and so the narratives of Progress and Great Men offered to us by society generally serve only to reinforce power. Benjamin warned that “even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” and that “this enemy has not ceased to be victorious”. The fact that the Nazi holocaust has been consistently wielded to justify the murder and oppression of the Palestinian people epitomizes how the dead can be reanimated to perpetuate cycles of domination. Similarly, looking at all the ways that historical revisionism has been used (occasionally by anarchists) to minimize the holocaust and perpetuate anti-semitism in the form of conspiracy theories reminds us that we simply don’t have the option of letting history rest in its grave. By engaging ourselves in this project called “history”, we can find ways to turn past struggles against current forms of domination and to “ensure that the memory of the dead continues to haunt the living.” I see this happening all around me with People’s History posters and Silvia Federici reading groups, with land acknowledgments and Haymarket handbills. History does not need to be neutral, but rather can fly in the face of domination and help to sharpen and expand our conflicts against the powerful. As our Chilean friends have declared: “Insurrectionary memory is our weapon!” It is my hope that this text can contribute to this ever-expanding arsenal. It is worth noting here that not all history speaks loudly enough for us to easily hear it. How many stories of concentration camp resistance have been lost? Because of the sheer brutality of the Nazi regime and the conditions of isolation in which much of this history unfolded, it is safe to assume that most acts of resistance were captured only in the fleeting wisps of gun smoke that silenced fastbeating, recalcitrant hearts. In so many ways, our willingness to attend to the silences of history may determine our ability to understand this world and how we got to where we are.

The Void

“The active nihilist sees in the unknown future and despair at our current situation, a call to arms. Meaning is found in approaching the void rather than In the false knowledge of what is on the other side of it.” —Attentat

“We are nihilists regardless of whether we call ourselves by the name, because we have no road out of this. We have only the starlit wilderness... The first act of navi-

gation is to set foot in the wilderness. Only then can we put our hands against the bare earth, feeling for the dim warmth of those fires still smoldering beneath.” — Hie Nihil, Hie Salta! (A Critique of Bartlebyism)”

With every rebellious footstep we take, we are entering an unknowable void. There are no reliable maps of the terrain that our struggles will occupy. No one has a leg up on the question of liberation. So much has been tried and so much has failed, let us finally admit that we don’t know what is “right” or what will “work”. Nobody knows how, why, or if a dominant order will fall. We don’t know if there are enough letterbombs in the world to bring an end to nuclear power, nor do we know if a well-timed mass uprising in Auschwitz would have actually succeeded in shutting down the camp. Despite what anyone tells us, there is no guarantee that the workers of the world are going to rise up, nor any assurances that such a thing would even lead to a desirable situation.

Though we have inherited a great many ideas about how to confront domination, we know that nothing is set in stone. From the shattered tools and bones of our predecessors, we craft our own weapons. Nothing is guaranteed to work, yet we attack regardless. We do so naked, having shed the rags of morality, ideology, and politics that had accumulated over time. We confront this world raw, in all its horrifying glory. We negate every truth and rule and we proceed with a spirit of incendiary experimentation. We dream big, expect little, and celebrate every moment of rupture. We take every opportunity to ensure that those in power lose sleep and that their functionaries have miserable jobs. We set our lives to ripping up the geraniums that line the extermination camp paths, pissing in the gears of society’s machinery, and when all else fails, we will follow in the footsteps of those who spent their final minutes in the gas chambers singing and fucking.

May jouissance be the blessed flame that guides us into the void.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Tal & Skinny
The Match Consumed
A Condensed Reading of “Blessed is the Flame”
2023/12/06

<www.warzonedistro.noblogs.org>

theanarchistlibrary.org