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Anarchist activity in Nazi Germany

Albert Meltzer

2006

After World War II, the police archives were taken by the Americans and when these were opened to scholars they found that German anarchist resistance through the ages had been extremely large. There had been an extremely active and influential working class anarchist movement in a line from that under Bismarck to that under Hitler. It had been ignored by historians because workers in general, like women in particular, only exist for them in relation to power politics or intellectual currents (also, perhaps, because it entails some real research as distinct from looking up other people's books). Here we can only give some pointers to research.

Much of the old anarcho-syndicalist movement, in the FAUD (later crushed by Hitler), was centred in the Rhineland and the Ruhr, where it had a base in the mines and in heavy industry and had built on the experience of workers councils in 1918. In Bavaria, the workers movement was much more fickle. Bavarian nationalism obscured the issue: in Munich, the people turned out almost in mass to mourn the death of the local hereditary petty ruler, but within months they were

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rising in mass against the bourgeoisie and upper class, though perhaps some saw it as against Prussian domination. A 'soviet' was formed-with the participation of anarchist intellectuals — to be crushed by the vicious bourgeois-Christian dictatorship. Hitler's new party was in due course subject to these fluctuations of sympathy, at first because it was thought to be 'Bavarian monarchist'. Its comic-opera rising in 1923 was mildly put down by the same government which had massacred the workers in the Commune of Munich. In some places like Wurttemberg there were under the Weimar Republic active sections of the FAUD, mainly railway workers who had escaped from Munich.

In Berlin the anarcho-syndicalists were part of a much wider anarchist movement and operated within a distinct socialistic culture, bitterly divided between orthodox Socialists and Communists which minimalised the effect of anarchism. The success of Hitler's party had a shattering and paralysing effect on the working class movement. For years it had been thought, even by those who opposed the Communist Party, that its Red Front/Army would put up a fight. It was expected that the struggle would come with its success, not with its failure. This attitude was ingrained even with those who advocated Socialist-Communist unity against Nazism. Though working class formations had long since battled in the streets against Hitlerism, nobody anticipated the struggle would be given up without a shot or a blow.

In a town like Cologne, only months before Hitler took power anarcho-syndicalists had organised a demonstration, receiving huge popular support, against the visit by Dr Goebbels, who bitterly complained he was 'chased out of his native town like a criminal'. It was a challenge to the larger tendencies, who felt obliged to organise similar demonstrations, making Nazi propaganda tours, at the height of the Depression (and therefore when 'historians' later claimed they were building

support) risky in the extreme. Hitler took to travelling by plane (then considered hazardous) as the lesser danger.

In Berlin, marches by Nazis were surrounded and heavily protected by police (like fascist marches in Britain). Isherwood, as a young observer a few months before the Nazis took power, noted how the hostile crowds in the Moabit working class district laughed when an elderly and portly SS captain could not sustain the pace, and finding himself on his own, frantically tried to catch up with the protective cordon. (A few months later and that captain would probably be invested with the power of life and death over the scoffers).

The Nazi murder gangs attacked individual opponents out on their own (something in the nature of contemporary gay-bashers) but shied in the main from open confrontation. One gang, to which Horst Wessel belonged, tried it on and he became a Nazi martyr. The Nazi (prepower) Jew-baiting activities were against professional people or writers, often when sitting around in cafes, and petty shopkeepers, on their own.

It never occurred to people, least of all organised workers living in proletarian districts, there they too would become isolated. After Hitler took power — was handed power by Hindenburg, with the tacit approval of most parties — the power of the SS dramatically increased.

Almost overnight the top-heavy organisation of the workers collapsed with the wholesale arrests, quite illegal, of their leadership. Nothing disappeared more ignominiously than the Red Front army, one day parading through the streets with its Moscow — trained generals, the next day languishing in holes and cellars in the hastily formed concentration camps (at first, converted derelict warehouses) without striking a blow (the despised Austrian reformist Social-Democrats at least fought it out to the last against Dolfuss).

The Communist party became illegalised, the Socialists and trade union movement tried to make their peace and niche and were slowly illegalised — after which social democracy had

nothing to offer. Trade union leaders sought to transfer their funds to war veterans' organisations (where for ideological reasons the Nazis could not sequester them, but controlled them anyway). The working class as a whole was stunned at the fact that the entire defence they had built around themselves had gone with the wind.

This overcame the German anarchists too, with the exception of the Rhineland, it became a marginalised dissent movement, unable to speak and therefore to grow. The Rhenish workers were slower to accept the situation, they were not initially provoked to industrial action by the Nazis, but as propaganda contacts vanished, they too succumbed though never completely). During the twelve years of Nazi dictatorship, a few isolated, especially industrially based, groups, remained constant. But any concerted action was never possible, though in Madrid during the civil war people queued to see a dud German shell displayed in the window of a large store, bearing a sage, 'Comrades! The shells I make do not explode'. (It may have been indicative of sabotage, which certainly went on, or it may be propaganda set up in Spain — who can tell ?)

Where the German anarchists, and the council-communists (who during the whole Nazi period sunk their differences, never great) resisted was by individual action. It is one of the ironies of history, though typical, that the only attempt against Hitler thought worthy of commemoration is that by the upper-class generals who backed his war effort until it was losing (while such intellectuals as Rudolf Rocker and Augustin Souchy within the International Workers Association declined after the War to support documentation on anarchist attempts on Hitler's life on the undoubtedly true grounds, such activity is what brings the anarchist into disrepute!).

Nobody ever assumed that the assassination of Hitler would entail automatic defeat of Nazism. But such was the concentrated hero worship of the Fuhrer, it would have destabilised the entire Nazi party, and given a revival of confidence to the

as amateur should bear in mind that those concerned were not professional assassins but ordinary workers living under intolerable oppression. At the very least, these events should be made public and not hidden. They were representative of the real feelings of workers during the years of class defeat when their rulers were dragging their name in filth.

anti-Nazi majority to assert itself once more, if merely defensively.

There were never as many attempts on Hitler as on Mussolini by the Italian anarchists, but far more than generally supposed. Only a few are listed here, and we have not even (for want of detailed knowledge) touched on other aspects of the resistance such as that of the anarcho-syndicalists at Duisburg. No attempt has ever been made in genuine research by those in a position to carry it out (lest it detract from the last-ditch plot, to save the Reich, of the generals and the Prussian aristocrats?)

The pioneer attempt (in fact, the destruction of the Reichstag, not an assassination plot) was that of van der Lubbe, a council-communist. He thought that the burning of the parliament of Nazis and those who had ceded them victory would be a signal for the proletariat to rise. Though successful as far as the burning went he was denounced by world communism and its liberal allies as a Nazi agent. The suggestion was that the Nazis did it themselves to discredit the Communists (a typical liberal response to action).

The Schwarztrotgruppe (Black and Red Group), originally based in Dusseldorf, was the first and most persistent of groups advocating and planning the assassination of Hitler. They felt that the mistake made in the Reichstag Fire was the involvement of a man of Dutch origin, bearing in mind the hatred of foreigners presumed to be growing in Germany with Nazi brainwashing (though in a totalitarian country one is inclined to think that everyone else is thinking and acting the same).

They twice set up near-successful attempts, once in the Munich beerhall where the nonevent of the Nazi putsch of 1923 was being celebrated, another time at the Nuremberg opera. Both were foiled at the last moment, but as the perpetrators escaped.

Those concerned fled to Glasgow (where they were given shelter by the late Frank Leech, a well-known Anarchist, in whose house I met them in 1937). They deemed it prudent to go to Birmingham (which had an interesting sequel when, a generation later, the German police by some confusion (no doubt caused by the loss of their main files to Washington) thought the Red and Black Group (English anarcho-pacifist) then existing was the same group as the Schwarzrot (Black Red) group, long since dead or dispersed, and named them, to their intense surprise, as responsible for the killing of an ex-Nazi banker.

There was an immediate response to these two failed attempts in an entirely individual plot to shoot Hitler at a rally in Cologne, but as the man responsible was caught, there may be no record. This led to mass arrests among Rhenish workers and caused a paralysis in activity. Of the many other attempts that were also made, one of which we have more facts is that of Hilda Monte. She was both in the anarchist and council communist movements, and had been active in two or three of the active resistance units.

An extremely determined person, she was disappointed that the Schwarzrot people had not used her (they felt her Jewish origin would be exploited by the Nazis, as it certainly was in the later case of Herschel Grynszpan whose assassination of vom Rath led to the notorious 'Crystal Night' pogrom). In order to work more freely, she became a British subject, by the device of marrying a gay activist, John Olday, who, though a German resident from birth, had a British passport through a Canadian father.

She was involved in plans for another attempt on Hitler's life at a rally and narrowly escaped to England. Olday was deported as a result. There the group with which she had been involved formulated the plans which had been thwarted by mere chance (Hitler hadn't turned up). They were funded originally by a wealthy industrialist, George Strauss, a Labour MP (later Father of the House). Hilda Monte returned to Germany, but

presumably the plan went wrong and she arrived back in London before war broke out.

The authorities were suspicious of a German who had turned up just before hostilities, even though she had a recently-acquired British husband with whom she had never lived! She was interned, and like many anti-fascists, felt the humiliation keenly. Contacting British anarchists, she felt sure her plan would go through if she could get back again. Strauss by now had backed out of the association, though his connections would have been useful (he possibly thought he was being inveigled into a Nazi plot though after the war he acknowledged his earlier help). The person Hilda Monte found, by coincidence, who was prepared to back her financially and with official contacts was a film star (who, whether by chance or discovery, was assassinated by the Nazis in Portugal).

She was allowed to return (how, I have no means of knowing) where she contacted her group, was captured by the Gestapo and murdered — fairly horribly, one assumes. A socialist comrade informs me that Det Sgt Jones, of Special Branch, spoke to him during the war of his concern about the reckless way in which Hilda had been allowed to return and his admiration for her audacity. It would seem Intelligence decided to clear her of any suspicion of wanting to help Hitler, and let her get on with her own thing. She is not mentioned in any list of Allied agents sent into Germany (some suggest because of her racial origin, or because of her sex but more probably because she was independent of Government service): her action is commemorated in Israel (where archives on her case are kept) though she was never a Zionist.

During the war when Hitler met Franco there was another plan to assassinate the pair of them together, by Spanish anarchists this time, though with some French and German involvement. This certainly would have changed the course of history, and certainly have been a highspot of anarchist resistance, had it been successful. Those who sneer at such attempts