The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright

Albert Meltzer
The Anarchist Black Cross
November 1992

Retrieved on 19th May 2021 from
www.katesharpleylibrary.net
In *KSL: Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library* No. 3, November 1992

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

The Anarchist Black Cross

Albert Meltzer

November 1992

The need to defend themselves against Tsarist police and Cossacks led to the formation of various Anarchist self-defence organisations within Russia. Both the Jewish and Lithuanian communities had formed defence organisations and on these a unified Anarchist Self-Defence was modeled. Later, this merged into the Anarchist Black Cross, an organisation supporting political prisoners and so far as possible, all those persecuted within Tsarist Russia for whatever reason. It was remodeled on the lines of the Red Cross and before and during the Civil War was funded by exiles in America. At the same time the work. of the Anarchist Self-Defence continued until incorporated into other fighting organisations, such as Makhno's army.

During the Russian Civil War, as a result of which the Red Cross was active in relief throughout the areas affected, the name "Anarchist Red Cross" was altered to "Black" to avoid confusion.

When Alexander Berkman was in Russia he was not in specific contact with the ABC but when he went back into exile he re-organised the ABC in Berlin. This fought for the rights of Russian prisoners, still possible at that stage, and then for the

prisoners of the Italian Fascisti. Its funding still largely came from America. As repression grew in country after country, the work of the ABC became more onerous, added to which the depression in America dried up the funding from Anarchist workers there, often the first to be hit by unemployment. Nevertheless comrades in Chicago continued the task for years in a fund named for Alexander Berkman, organised by B. Yelensky.

During the Spanish Civil War (and after) it was found that practically all international support from radical organisations to Spain went to the Communist Party. A scandal arose among the miners and printers that money specifically raised for Spanish miners and for printers never went to those unions, because they were not Communist controlled, but instead diverted to the UGT or the Popular Front. Catalonia received not a penny because the unions were anarcho-syndicalist. Sam Mainwaring Junior raised the matter at the 1937 NUM conference and Albert Meltzer with London Printers Anti-Fascist Committee, to no avail. The CP influence was too strong and denounced criticism as "trotskyite-fascist", then their favourite slogan. Mutual aid groups were mooted, some put into practice, all on the lines of the ABC but unconnected with each other. At this time Meltzer started the Asian Prisoners Aid (an offshoot of many groups for Indian political prisoners) with M.P.T. Acharya and extended it to cover Chinese prisoners.

During the Civil War the CNT floated a new international fund, principally but not exclusively for Spanish refugees, the Solidarid Internacional Antifascista (SIA). At that time the ABC was no longer in existence. The monetary support came mostly from the CNT members themselves.

After the Defeat the Spanish refugees especially in France required massive support but all they received was that contributed by other Spanish comrades in the SIA. However, after the World War, the official Spanish libertarian movement in exile seemed to hold aloof from those who continued the

struggle in Spain. When Stuart Christie went to Spain in an abortive *attentat* against Franco, his case aroused international interest (as it involved a Briton — there had been many French and Italian comrades joining with the Spanish before him). Both the British press and many liberals thought it a frame-up (which caused maximum embarrassment to the Franco regime just when tourism was beginning). As a result attention was focused on the Spanish prisoners [and] the postwar genocide (estimated at a million people through one cause or another, equal to the number of German Jews killed by Hitlerism). Christie received immense support in food parcels and so on which he shared with the other libertarian prisoners, and so a new network of support for Spanish political prisoners was built. Few abroad had realised such help was possible, and SIA had not enlightened them.

The CNT had always helped its political prisoners, but it was felt the SIA was not playing a sufficient part at the time. For instance, the majority of the money collected for Spanish exiles in France was from American Jewish and Italian needleworkers in the States, who loathed the CP, but supported Spanish anti-fascism. Some of those involved in the Christie defence campaigns managed, through the efforts of Nancy MacDonald, to get this support diverted to the libertarian prisoners. After his release, Christie joined with Albert Meltzer to re-form the Anarchist Black Cross, the committee since the death of Acharya in Bombay being limited to correspondence with a few Chinese comrades and Christie utilised his own contacts with CNT prisoners. The idea was not to collect money but to persuade people to adopt a prisoner, and write or (as could be done in the case of Spain but not elsewhere) send food parcels.

The first prisoner to be released who was supported by the ABC in those last years was Miguel Garcia (who had served 22 years) and the three extended the ABC to an international network. The paper Black Flag, started as a bulletin of the ABC, made it well known in the anarchist movement, and indepen-

dent groups, and networks were established everywhere in an informal international.

The work of the ABC has not been "philanthropic". It has raised collections for prisoners and sent parcels but its main work has been solidarity and making sure people are not forgotten. Its most active section now is in Greece where it is the main unifying factor on the libertarian scene. Internationally, two of its secretaries have been murdered by the police — Giuseppe Pinelli, of Milan, was thrown to his death from a police station window, Georg Von Rauch, of Berlin, was shot down in the street by police. In Denmark too it is strong and forms the basis of the Anarchist movement.

Its sections in Canada, America and Australia pioneered the idea of extending support from just Anarchist and political prisoners to all class struggle prisoners, and this is now general. Owing to resistance to the poll tax, at one time there were more British anarchist prisoners than Spanish. The international network, loosely organised, now spreads far beyond the early days when it was an offshoot of "Black Flag", and groups are entirely autonomous.

It has avoided setting up a section in Spain because of the existence of SIA and the CNT Pro-prisoners aid, seeing no point in duplication. The Stockholm chapter of ABC calls itself Anarchist Black Hammer, and the question has recently been raised as to whether the name, ABC should not be changed since it is extending its activities to Muslim countries where "cross" might be misunderstood (it is obviously not intended in a religious sense).