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Review: A One-Man Manifesto and Writings Against Power and Death

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Freedom Press. Herbert Read. 212 pages. Freedom
Press. £6.**

**Writings Against Power and Death. Alex Comfort.
168 pages. Freedom Press. £5.**

Anarchist Communist Federation

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Both these books appeared in 1994, and are anthologies of a couple of intellectuals associated with the anarchist movement in this country from the late thirties until the fifties. Read declared anarchism in 1937 as a result of his observations of the Spanish Revolution and Civil War- quite an effort when you consider that many British intellectuals had rallied to the Soviet lie-machine (an experience that was to be repeated with a passing adulation among some for the ‘achievements’ of Maoist China). Both he and Comfort were to provide articles and sometimes speak at public meetings, although neither involved themselves in day-to-day practical activity like the production of propaganda. Read saw the future society as

anarchist communist, but along with many others of the day, thought that this would be achieved through a syndicalist strategy. "On his return from the United States...he came to see me and talked mostly about supermarkets, which he had seen for the first time, and which interested him because people took what they wanted from the shelves; it seemed to him that, if only the cash desks at the entrances could be removed, the supermarket would be the perfect model for free anarchist communist distribution..." (Recollection of George Woodcock, quote in Read book). Certainly Read's early writings collected here are staunchly revolutionary in particular his *The Method of Revolution*. However by 1947, Read's revolutionism was beginning to wane and he turned increasingly to the quietist, non-violent ideas that were beginning to emerge within the movement, that would sap it (and continue to sap it) for many a year. Take for example his *Anarchism Past and Future*, a lecture delivered to the London anarchists in 1947. "The word revolution should largely disappear from our propaganda, to be replaced by the word education...". He goes on to call for the discarding of the romantic conceptions of anarchism, including insurrection and the arming of the working class. "All that kind of futile agitation has long been obsolete: but it was finally blown into oblivion by the atomic bomb. The power of the State, of our enemy, is now absolute. We cannot struggle against it on the plane of force, on the material plane. Our action must be piecemeal, non-violent, insidious and universally pervasive."

This defeatist 'educationalist' and non-violent approach was to reach its climax in Read's acceptance of a knighthood for his contribution to the arts. Read's feeble excuses for why he accepted this are re-printed in the book. From this moment on he had little to do with the movement. Dying in 1968, he left a legacy of revolutionary writings from the forties, some re-printed here.

Comfort was to gravitate to the anarchist movement as a result of his opposition to all wars, including the Second World War. This anti-militarism or pacifism, was not one weighed down with false ideas of non-violence. Comfort welcomed popular resistance and was to remark upon the Allied slaughter of tens of thousands with its bombings of Dresden and other German towns that: "Not one political leader who has tolerated this filthy thing, or the indiscriminate bombardment of Germany which preceded it, should be permitted to escape the consequence of what he has done".

However, unlike Read's anarchism, at least in the forties, Comfort's was not based on class struggle but on the revolt of the individual. As he himself mistakenly remarked: "The war is not between classes. The war is at root between individuals and barbarian society". Thus, his anti-war articles contained in the book under review, whilst they heartily denounce the World War and the atrocities of both Axis and Allies, always fall back on a call for individuals as individuals to disobey. His other post-war articles gathered here because it is assumed by the compiler that they contain some libertarian interest, range over topics such as the American novel, George Orwell, Whither Israel, etc. provoke a big Why? from this reviewer.

Comfort and Read, like George Woodcock, were intellectuals who rallied to the anarchist movement for several years and then moved off again. Meanwhile others got on with the donkey-work of the incessant propaganda and agitation. Are these books produced because they are the writings of celebrities? Is it not the case that the value of these intellectuals is over-estimated? Was there not a disdain, from Woodcock at least, for working class anarchists? Would it not be the case that a number of liberal ideas were imported by Comfort, Read and Woodcock into the British anarchist movement? I'd finish by saying that Read's book is worth a read, whilst Comfort's is of peripheral interest (dare I assume!) to the reader of *Organise!*