Like Mushrooms After a Rain

The Jewish Insurrectionary Anarchists of Bialystok

Anonymous

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Preface

"Groups sprang up like mushrooms after a rain in cities, villages, and hamlets."
—Yuda Grossman, Bialystok anarchist

This is an incomplete history of some poor Jewish teenagers who spread a ton of anarchy from one small corner of the Russian Empire between 1903 and 1907. They identified the entire social order as their enemy and set about attacking it with words, daggers, bullets, fire, and bombs—lots of bombs. They believed in insurrection and the sanctity of the unrestrained idea. They despised the professional "revolutionaries" who suffocated revolt and the Jewish traitors who stood among their oppressors. They traveled restlessly, forged bonds across the continent, and convened large meetings under the open sky. They constantly reinvented themselves, claiming new names and formations when it suited them. They spoke in Yiddish, language of the unassimilated Jewish poor, and some of them knew how to write it. They called themselves terrorists. They loved each other.

Their rebellion was crushed by executions and reforms. From exile, one of them wrote: "It is necessary right now to create one contrary, antithetical spot in the huge picture which represents democracy. Just one spot. It will flare up and then be extinguished. But it will leave a trace."

I: Der Kamf

The 20th century was nearing, and Russia had a problem: the poor country people at the edges of its huge empire. They were too self-reliant, too unassimilated, too rebellious, and generally too busy not mass-producing stuff their government could sell on the international market. This was especially true of the 5 million Jews the empire had forced into its western borderlands, who mostly hated the government and didn't care about any market beyond the one in their village square. So the Tsar made new laws barring Jews from living rurally or traveling. He also made it illegal for Jews to work decent-paying jobs or go to college. Ripped from their villages and crammed into urban ghettos, Jews started filling the factories when business boomed and the streets when it tanked.

This is how Bialystok, a small city in the far west governed today by Poland, became the largest Jewish-majority city in the empire by 1900. Bialystok was a major center of Russia's emerging textile industry, and most of the new Jewish migrants (including the children) worked 12-hour days bleaching and dyeing cloth on factory floors or bending over looms in cramped workshops. Jews also made up the majority of the city's unsheltered population and the foundation of its underground economy. Some of them wound up running factories and workshops of their own, joining the hated class most Jews referred to as balebatem—owners, bosses, bourgeoisie.

Bialystok's new underclass began to rebel as soon as they arrived. Through the 1890s, Jewish textile workers broke looms, beat scabs, threw bricks at cops and sulfuric acid at balebatem, and coordinated mass strikes through leaderless assemblies. One participant recalled that his assembly "had no strongly designated rules, no steady income—and yet it existed and functioned." At the same time, a host of new Leftist organizations were stepping in to control these anarchic elements and redirect combative urges into lawful, legible campaigns. The most prominent of these was a social democratic party founded in the city of Vilne in 1897 called the General Jewish Labor Bund.

When the Bund sent its first middle class missionaries to "enlighten" the Bialystok workers, they were horrified to find the locals were "ignorant, almost primitive people" with no "political consciousness" to speak of. They set about organizing the "more developed workers" into dues-paying circles that received weekly lectures and quizzes on Marxism prepared by an "Intellectuals' Commission." As the number of the indoctrinated grew, the Bialystok Bund set up its own newspapers, conferences, and parades and directed orderly strikes for better working conditions. By 1901, their leaders had gained a following large enough to isolate anyone who threatened the authority of the party and its program of gradual, nonviolent political reform. So, fed up with condescending lectures and desiring an immediate break with the existing order, a small handful of young Bialystok Jews began meeting on their own in spring of 1903.

This group of about ten people called itself simply Der Kamf, Yiddish for "The Struggle." Historians consider them the first self-described anarchist group in the Russian Empire. Their anarchism was inspired by scraps of literature smuggled from enclaves of exiled Jewish radicals in Geneva, Paris, and London by itinerant Jews: migrant workers, roving vagabonds, and military deserters. One of Der Kamf 's own members, a 24-year-old unschooled former hay baler named Shlema Kaganovich (alias Zeydl), had just returned from wandering around western Europe for 6 years with a passion for seditious ideas. He brought with him an anarchist journal from Geneva called Bread and Liberty—full of articles about the Chicago Haymarket riot, writings by Bakunin and Kropotkin, and translations of Italian anarchists—that his comrades passed around until the paper disintegrated. Unlike Zeydl, most of Der Kamf were teenagers, some as young as 15, working mostly as weavers and tailors. At least two were women: 16-year-old Rivke Yaroshevskaya and 19-year-old Beyla Shereshevskaya-Vaysbaum (alias Sherka).[1] Sherka's comrades described her as "a small, slightly stooped girl with a soft smile" belying a "tremendous strength of will." When Der Kamf started up, she'd just been expelled from the local girls' high school for joining clandestine workers' study circles.

The kids of Der Kamf got busy doing anarchy. They interrupted Bund meetings with critiques of legalism and hierarchy, agitated for sabotage and theft among their coworkers, and talked to street thieves about joining forces. Sherka organized discussion groups, Rivke distributed hectographed excerpts from Bread and Liberty, and Zeydl made frequent illegal trips to Geneva for more literature, money, and guns. Soon, they were publishing their own anonymously authored Yiddish pamphlets discussing schools as institutions of social control, detailing local incidents of police violence, criticizing Marxists for their anti-homeless programs, and mocking proposals to replace the autocracy with a more democratic government. Their pamphlets encouraged the spread of self-directed attacks on authority (i.e. insurrection) with declarations like "the worker should stop offering their muscles for the accumulation of others' riches and should start attacking property" and "violent acts, whether mass or individual, are the only means by which one can liberate oneself."

But perhaps most importantly for spreading insurrection, they started shooting cops. In summer of 1903, after police beat a group of demonstrating workers, some anarchists wounded one of the cops responsible. A month later, two separate attacks were made on the chief of police, though he somehow got lucky twice. The Bund denounced these actions as "shameful," tactically "ignorant," and an offense to "moral feelings." But word of the anarchists' bullets spread

[1] I'm using their Yiddish first names. The few English-language sources that mention them use Russified versions: Rebekka Yaroshevskaya and Beilya Shereshevskaya.

like fire along with their pamphlets, and by the end of the year over 70 rank-and-file Bundists had left the party to join existing Der Kamf crews or form their own. Among these were two individuals we'll return to: 18-year-old Freyda Simkhelevna Novik, a worker who had broken from her strictly religious family to join the Bund two years earlier, and 20-year-old Benyamin Bajraj (alias Notka), who had abandoned his own middle-class family and gained a reputation as an eager public speaker, if not a very good one.[2]

Through their pamphlet distributions, Der Kamf crews began making contacts with Jews in other places. In the neighboring small town of Krynki, known for producing quality leather and rebellious youth, proto-black bloc demonstrations emerged.[3] Anarchists in Krynki and Bialystok carted weapons between the two towns and shared tactics at each other's meetings. Der Kamf 's connections also extended to major cities: By 1904, Sherka had vanished and then reappeared in Odessa with a newly-formed but well-resourced group calling itself The Irreconcilables. She once again brought together "study circles" (by now thinly veiled organs for vetting people into the underground) and worked in an illegal print shop. When her Bialystok comrades began running out of printing funds, one of them trainhopped to Odessa and reestablished contact with Sherka, who handed over a hefty amount of Irreconcilables literature and money. Unfortunately, not long afterwards Sherka was arrested on suspicion of anarchist involvement and would spend the next half a year in prison.

Back in Bialystok, the struggle intensified as economic crises put thousands of workers on the streets. Soon anger boiled over into a day-long riot where the unemployed smashed storefronts and looted bread. In the search for "ringleaders," police picked out a familiar face—one that everyone in Bialystok would know by the year's end—belonging to a poor 18-year-old Jew named Nisan Farber. Raised by strangers while his dad panhandled in front of the shul (synagogue), Nisan grew up stealing time from his abusive bakery apprenticeship to read radical literature. When he discovered Der Kamf 's pamphlets in 1903, he threw himself into anarchy, attending every meeting, debating every Bundist, and fighting cops at every rally. After Nisan returned from his brief incarceration for the bread riot, he and his comrades began regularly stealing food and smuggling it to the prisoners he'd befriended inside—a solidarity practice that only deepened each time they got caught and locked up. By summer of 1904, Nisan had cycled through prison at least seven times since the start of the year.

That August, the workers of Bialystok's largest textile mill went on strike. The factory owner, a rich Jew reviled by the Jews he exploited, sent for Christian strike-breakers from Moscow, and a battle erupted that left one Bialystok worker dead. On Yoym Hadin (Yom Kippur), the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, Nisan spotted the balebos leaving shul in Krynki, stabbed him twice with a dagger, and disappeared among the worshipers. Two months later, he emerged from clandestinity to carry out his last attack. During the holiday of Suke (Sukkot), police fired on a meeting of several hundred strikers in the forest outside town, shooting people in the back as they tried to flee. The Central Committee of the Bund put out an unfathomably mild call for single-day labor strikes; Nisan had other ideas. On the eve of October 7, 1904, after testing his device in a park on the outskirts of town, Nisan walked into a Bialystok police station and hurled a bomb—a tin

[2] Freyda is usually referred to (when she's referred to at all) as Freida or Frida Novik. Again, I'm using her Yiddish name.

[3] From Krynki resident Yosl Cohen's memoir: "That demonstration was scary. The anarchists wore clothes that served as a sort of uniform: black shirts, black pants, black burkes (which were sort of short jackets like the sailors wear), black peaked caps or tuft hats, and a black elastic masks on their faces."

can filled with nails and dynamite.[4] When the debris settled, three cops lay bleeding on the floor, and Nisan was dead.

As word of Nisan's actions spread, Der Kamf circulated a pamphlet celebrating the High Holiday attacks for speaking to the enemy not in the reconcilable language of demands but the antagonistic language of violence. Its authors defended the charged location and timing of the stabbing, writing that the Jewish poor and owning classes "have two gods, two temples, and two distinct altars." This was not just a metaphorical claim, since poor Jews were officially barred from the Krynki shul and conducted their own rituals in an autonomous besmedresh (house of study) or at secret forest gatherings.[5] Of the assault on the police station, Der Kamf simply wrote that there was only ever one way to enter a state institution: "with a bomb." By the time this pamphlet hit the streets, police had already raided homes and arrested multiple anarchists, including Zeydl. But attacks continued into the winter, leaving at least one prison guard gravely injured. And back in Odessa, Sherka was released for lack of evidence. As 1904 came to a close, the Jewish anarchists licked their wounds, sharpened their claws, and carried the memory of Nisan into a coming battle whose scope they couldn't possibly have guessed.

II: Di Grupe

A revolution happened in 1905—almost. That January, riots erupted across the empire after government troops massacred hundreds of striking factory workers in St. Petersburg. Soon whole cities would shut down, and the country sky would glow with burning manors. Sailors would mutineer, workers would derail trains, and bandits would rob government transports. The revolution arrived in Krynki on January 17, when a massive crowd led by armed youth marched on the town center and chased the cops into the woods. Taking control of the village and shaking off Bundist peace patrols, they destroyed the post office and burned all the evidence files in the police station. One group of kids gleefully smashed every last bottle in the liquor store "so that no one could use it," while others raided the apartments of local cops. Notably, several hundred blank passports were stolen from the borough council office that would later turn up in the hands of Bialystok anarchists fleeing the country.

But fleeing was a long way away, and the revolution in Bialystok was just getting started. Shops closed, coachmen left their carts empty on the streets, and Jewish girls abandoned their looms to run through the dirty snow singing anarchist songs. While the Bund belatedly announced a general strike and instructed workers to focus demands on political reform, Der Kamf crews teamed up with rogue strikers to meet their needs through armed robbery, hitting shoe factories in particular because many people didn't have any. When the city called in Cossack shock troops to quell the unrest with random beatings, anarchists and coachmen launched attacks that killed two of the mercenaries and convinced the rest to just skip town. So district police arrived from nearby Grodno to replace the Cossacks—and anarchists killed their chief.

In February, realizing their hectographs couldn't keep up with the rocketing demand for literature, a Der Kamf group worked with socialist defectors to rob machinery and ink from a printing

[4] All dates are given according to the Julian calendar, in use by the Russian Empire until 1918.

[5] The Krynki shul had long been a site of class struggle and symbol of oppression for the local Jewish underclass. Its rabbi was a hated rich man who led factory bosses in suppressing strikes throughout the 1890s. During one strike in 1897, Jewish tannery workers occupied the shul and prevented balebatem from entering on shabes.

press in Vilne. By May, the first anarchist print shop in the Russian Empire was up and running out of a comrade's unregistered Bialystok apartment. They named it, naturally, Anarkhye. Along with a group of Zeydl's Bread and Liberty friends who had ditched Geneva when they heard the revolution was on, one of the core people who kept Anarkhye operational was the former Bundist Freyda Novik.

By this time, Der Kamf had undergone a serious transformation. In fact, it wasn't even called Der Kamf anymore. What had begun two years ago as a group of ten people was now a large network of cells totaling around 300 members—mostly poor Jewish teenagers who had just ditched their party organizations or discovered new applications for criminal skills. This network called itself Di Grupe Anarkhisten-Komunisten fun Bialystok, or "The Bialystok Anarchist-Communist Group." Referred to by surviving members as Di Grupe, "The Group" was in fact a loose collection of many small groups operating independently. Among these crews, "federations" emerged based on former political affiliations (such as the ex-Socialist Revolutionary Party federation) or a common language (in the case of the Polish federation). "Assemblies" of people from different crews formed to focus on specific tasks like writing and acquiring literature, running the print shop, or making bombs. Any non-conspiratorial matters concerning all crews were discussed at "general assemblies" that met in the forest or in the Jewish cemetery. Overlapping with Di Grupe crews were new, politically unaffiliated workers' federations that held their own meetings, which many anarchists regularly attended.

Throughout the summer of 1905, Freyda and the print shop assembly published a steady stream of pamphlets in batches of one to two thousand. Addressed in Yiddish to the Jewish underclass, these writings expressed not a political platform but a raw thirst for the death of the existing order and the flourishing of life over its ruins. One consistent theme was the dead-end of hierarchical Leftist parties for anyone seeking freedom. "We cannot expect anything from these organizations," the authors of one pamphlet wrote, "which from their political heights dispatch their permissions and their prohibitions." Instead, they urged people to listen to their own instincts against domination: "When you act, you free yourself, allowing your natural creativity to develop." Anyone was capable of identifying, without lessons from self-appointed "revolutionists," who and what was oppressing them and deciding to attack it. Occasionally, the pamphlets sketched hungry, blurry visions of anarchist communes as places "to live without rich or poor, bosses or slaves" (hence the Anarchist-Communist label, which had nothing to do with Bolshevism). But their vision got sharper when describing the damage they desired to inflict on the present world: "We will rob their bread, we will destroy their buildings, we will burn their police stations, we will kill the bosses and the landowners." Indeed, for Di Grupe utopia meant apocalypse. One pamphlet told the ruling class, "we will destroy everything that you have created."

These writings were mainly distributed, read, and debated at the Surazer Street birzhe— the marketplace at the center of Jewish proletarian social life. In non-revolutionary times, the birzhe (literally "the exchange") was where you went to haggle over herring and sour milk, learn about job postings, get drunk after being laid off, or gossip about your neighbors. During the rebellions of 1905, anarchists transformed the plaza into a fully autonomous forum where people shared grievances and ideas, coordinated meeting times and places, and passed around the latest communiques printed at Anarkhye. Heated nightly discussion circles—with regular appearances by Notka, always ready for some public speaking—commonly erupted into spontaneous demonstrations of up to 5,000 angry Jews through the spring and summer. It wasn't lost on anyone that the anarchist birzhe was only possible because all the nearby police stations were empty: At the

beginning of the year, cops had received orders to retreat from the anarchist stronghold before more of them got shot.

With so many anarchists doing such visibly anarchist things, general interest in autonomous forms of struggle grew in exciting ways—and sometimes presented new challenges. Bundist leaders lamented that "many workers now say there should be no party, no political organization: the workers alone can lead." Unaffiliated teens got together to practice their aim in the Jewish cemetery with Brownings and Mausers that Di Grupe robbed from police stations. Polish women textile workers interrupted anarchist meetings demanding, to everyone's delight, to be told what this whole class war thing was about. At the same time, people began approaching anarchists on the street to ask if someone could do something about the teacher who was beating their kid or the landlord who was evicting their mom. Some workers even wanted Di Grupe to lead their strikes. But it seems that, for the most part, the Bialystok anarchists really were insistent about self-liberation: They would rather show people how to build their own bombs, or effectively fight the cops at their own rally, than become some professional cadre of assassins and street-fighters available for hire by "the masses."

Interest in anarchist methods also spread well beyond Bialystok. Of course, Odessa already had Sherka and the Irreconcilables, now reorganized as the Odessa Anarchist-Communist Workers' Group. When things popped off in January, Sherka threw herself tirelessly into spreading the insurrection, helping new crews get off the ground, distributing incendiary pamphlets, meeting with potential comrades among Odessa's Jewish poor, and making constant trips to Bialystok and Warsaw to coordinate activities. She was rearrested in February, and while her comrades outside built bombs and robbed lawyers, Sherka helped start a riot of over 200 prisoners in July. By that time, rebels across the empire were abandoning their political parties, forming their own Anarchist- Communist crews, federating themselves locally, and establishing lines of communication with other towns and cities.

Comrades started showing up in Bialystok with requests for advice, pamphlets, and weapons, offering in return news and literature from afar and opportunities to communicate through coded letters. Groups sprang up as far south as the Crimean Peninsula, as far north as St. Petersburg, as far east as Moscow, and across territories now governed by the states of Moldova, Ukraine, Poland, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland. Anarchist crews in Warsaw blew up the ovens of industrial bakeries, pouring kerosene into the dough. In Riga and Minsk, fugitives from the Bialystok printing assembly helped local crews set up their own print shops. In Yekaterinoslav, a young anarchist caught sabotaging railway lines proudly told the judge, "it was not the orators who won me over to anarchism, but life itself." At the height of the 1905 rebellions, the empire was crawling with small groups of mostly Jewish teenagers robbing and killing and exploding things, wearing their signature black high collar shirts and long black dresses, claiming their actions in the name of anarchy.

Still, throughout 1905 Bialystok remained by far the most active hub of anarchism. Di Grupe crews were constantly carrying out "eks," their Yiddish shorthand for expropriations. They hit banks, gun shops, post offices, liquor stores, and rich people's homes, using the money to buy ink and paper and convene meetings of anarchists from across the empire. According to one of them, "if we needed money for the movement, a generous donation of a few hundred or thousand rubles would be obtained from the capitalist fellow Jew, persuaded with a pistol pointed at his head." Attacks on balebatem and their factories happened so frequently they became utterly normal—a stick of dynamite tossed into a fancy apartment here, a bomb planted under some machinery

there. One factory owner had to literally jump out of a window to escape a mob of angry workers. But the sharpest conflict of 1905 was between the Jewish anarchists and Russian law enforcement, and it reached its height that summer. One resident recalled that "it was not uncommon for a Russian policeman, a police chief, or even a governor-general, to be found on a dark night at the corner of a dark street, shot by the bullet of a revolutionary." And though many anarchists, including those I've already introduced, took part in the battles of June and July, it is impossible to do these battles justice without introducing Gelinker.

Before he was Gelinker, Aron Yelin was a street kid.[6] His mother died a preventable death from an illness she was too poor to treat; his religious father beat him for not being a pious enough Jew. At 13, Aron began work at a tannery, where he found language for his oppression among his older coworkers in the Socialist Revolutionary Party. But he never quite could conform to the party line any more than his father's image of piety, and when a bunch of the rank-and-file jumped ship to join the anarchists in spring of 1905, a 17-year- old Aron went with them. His comrades now called him Gelinker, "Lefty." They described him as quiet, clear-headed, and humble, someone who never itched for a fight but never flinched from one, either. When Gelinker got his first revolver, he etched into it a reminder for himself: "death to tyrants." By the time of that summer's battles, he had already used it twice—once to fire on a group of Cossack soldiers, and once to kill a building manager who tipped off police about a safe house where Anarkhye printing equipment was stored.

In June, with a majority of the population in open revolt, Bialystok authorities reorganized their forces. They stationed gendarmes across the city and created a new police headquarters just outside the Surazer Street birzhe where senior officials met daily to chart their counter-insurgency. Anarchists called this headquarters the "police birzhe," and they held their own meetings to plan its destruction. One afternoon, Gelinker tossed a bomb into the police birzhe and, carrying Nisan Farber's legacy with him, escaped unharmed while seven senior officials lay wounded. Shortly afterwards he struck again, sprinting up to a group of gendarmes and high-ranking cops with a lit bomb and a cry of "long live anarchy!" This time his device killed ten men, and again he disappeared.

The conflict erupted into all-out war: Police mounted heavily armed raids of the birzhe and anarchists responded with gunfire, striking fast and melting back into the labyrinth of alleys where cops didn't dare follow. Captured comrades were avenged with broad- daylight assassinations of those who had ordered the arrests. Once, when several rebels were murdered, anarchists set off city fire sirens and laid in wait for hours with bombs in hand, but no cop wanted to risk it. Senior officers stopped showing their faces in public, and their squads outright refused to risk raids. So the city tried bringing soldiers into the birzhe—but most of these guys were peasant conscripts, and they began reading and discussing anarchist pamphlets when they were supposed to be patrolling. The authorities needed a better, more brutal plan.

On the afternoon of July 30, some workers gathered in the birzhe for a demonstration that had been called by the Bund. It was publicly announced and intended, for some reason, to be peaceful. But the city had been busy weeding out corruptible soldiers and calling in loyal reinforcements, and they wanted to make the rebels bleed. A mass of troops flooded into the birzhe, and when no workers obeyed their commands to disperse, they started shooting. Multiple people were killed

[6] English-language sources usually give his government name as Aron Elin. I'm basing my choice of Aron Yelin on a Yiddish pamphlet written by his comrades after his death.

on the spot, and everyone who could fled. But in ten minutes a furious crowd was gathering, and anarchists were sending around whispers to clear the square while one of them—Gelinker—ran to get a bomb. Either the message didn't penetrate very far through the chaos or people weren't interested in moving, because when Gelinker returned holding a bomb the square was as packed as ever. Soldiers had control of the street, but they were face to face with the mass of angry people who filled the sidewalks. With seconds to act, Gelinker decided to do a really dangerous thing. Pushing his way towards the street, he lit the bomb and hurled it at the soldiers. The explosion wounded an official, four soldiers, and Gelinker. It also killed a worker at the front of the crowd: A rank-and-file member of the Bund named Ester Riskind, known better by her alias Hinda. Like Freyda, 25-year-old Hinda had fled her religious home as a teenager after refusing an arranged marriage, and when Gelinker's bomb ended her life she was spending her days protesting and teaching Yiddish to children.

As the soldiers in the street began to scramble over each other and flee, Gelinker's comrades grabbed him and pulled him to safety. Within half an hour, the Russian army had regrouped and stormed the birzhe with a vengeance. For hours, they roamed the streets killing anyone they took for a Jew. Only once they began to pull out at night was it possible to tend to the hundreds wounded and identify the bodies of the 30 to 40 Jews who'd been murdered, ranging in age from 11 to 75. The next morning, practically every single worker in the city and surrounding towns who wasn't already on strike refused to go into work. Some 15,000 people met in the courtyard of the Jewish hospital where the wounded lay. Fearing an armed uprising, Bialystok authorities surrounded the city with cannons and announced they were ready to bomb it all to hell at the first sign of an uprising.

But the uprising never came. For the anarchists' part, they were low on weapons, stretched thin caring for the wounded, and hesitant to do something that might get them all blown up. Hinda was on everyone's mind. On August 1, a somber crowd of 30,000—just under half Bialystok's population—assembled in the streets for a funeral procession. Elite factory owners, feeling themselves on extremely thin ice, met with the government and convinced them to let it happen rather than provide the spark that would get them all overthrown. So without meeting resistance, the procession made its way through the main streets, bearing wreaths shining with black and red ribbons and singing songs of grief. When they reached the Jewish cemetery, they stopped. Some Bundists made some speeches. Some anarchists shouted out cries for vengeance, for action. And then the mournful crowd slowly dispersed.

In the wake of the July 30 massacre, the city seized on general fear and despair to entrench its repressive campaign. In August, martial law was officially declared in Bialystok, and many anarchists skipped town with passports supplied by their Krynki comrades. Among them were Rivke—the now-18-year-old who had distributed pamphlets with Der Kamf back in 1903—and Gelinker. Within weeks, cops arrested Gelinker in Kiev for battling some local fascists, though with his fake papers they never realized who they had captured. In September, Bialystok police finally discovered and raided the Anarkhye print shop, capturing Freyda and two others when the bomb they threw down the stairs didn't explode. Her comrades later managed to break out, but Freyda was convicted of storing explosives and sentenced to forced labor in Siberia. By October, a balebos calculated that the rebels had endured enough stick beatings to make a carrot look good, and he offered striking workers a paltry compromise on demands. To the anarchists' horror, the strikers accepted.

But the state's most effective weapon of pacification in Bialystok and across the empire that fall—and the reason the 1905 Russian Revolution didn't actually become a revolution—was the Tsar's "October Manifesto." Forced to choose between being deposed by armed insurrection and making some semblance of concessions to appease the people, the Tsar held his nose and promised a series of reforms towards a constitutional monarchy: freedom of speech, new ministers, and an elected body reviewing imperial decrees, plus amnesty for select political prisoners. And unfortunately, it worked. In the major cities, people who had just yesterday set barricades on fire picked up Russian flags and paraded through the streets to celebrate. In Bialystok, shops reopened, coachmen resumed transporting goods, and within four days almost everyone was back to work. In one final mass attack on the state, a crowd of Jews gathered outside the city jail and, believing the Tsar had promised freedom for all prisoners, tried to force their way in. But they were pacified by a combination of stern words from "leaders" and bullets from soldiers. After this failed attempt, most of what remained from the past nine months of popular rebellion was a song: "The Tsar was frightened and issued a manifesto: Freedom for the dead and prison for the living."

Weakened from police raids and depressed by the vanishing revolt, Di Grupe fractured. Some felt the time for bombs and bullets had passed and left to focus on writing anarchist propaganda until a next rebellion broke out. Others were convinced they could inject new life into the dying revolution by attempting to liberate a major city and actually do the whole anarchist communes thing. This ambitious faction left in December for Yekaterinoslav, where all of them were immediately arrested. But most of the Bialystok anarchists were still committed to doing what they had always done: spreading insurrection through many small attacks on the state and the rich. Only this time, the attacks—and the list of potential targets—would be a lot bigger.

III: Chernoe Znamya

One cold day in October 1905, some anarchists met in Bialystok's Jewish cemetery. Most had come on behalf of larger crews, though a few were just representing themselves. Notka was there, as were two universally respected comrades just released from prison: Sherka, finally freed from a dungeon in central Russia as part of the Tsar's amnesty, and Gelinker, whose jailers in Kiev had never figured out who he was. Everyone agreed that they needed to combat the atmosphere of complacency and defeat with bold counter-attacks, driving a knife through all attempts at reconciliation between rulers and ruled. Both needed to be reminded that the war wasn't over, and the best way to issue that reminder, the meeting concluded, was terrorism. Specifically, their proposal was a "motiveless" terrorism: one that didn't need a pretext to strike a specific oppressor but was content to unleash violence on any and all members of the ruling class. These attacks would be carried out not in the small city of Bialystok, but in the major industrial centers of the empire. One group, Sherka and Notka among them, would go to Warsaw and meet up with Sherka's contacts there. Another group, including Gelinker, would join Sherka's old comrades in Odessa. They would carry out their actions under a new name: Chernoe Znamya, "Black Banner."

Unlike Der Kamf and Di Grupe, Chernoe Znamya was a Russian name, not a Yiddish one. It was likely the suggestion of one highly vocal anarchist among them who could actually read and write Russian. It was primarily this guy who put together the first and only issue of the group's Russian-language journal. The front page featured a pretty wordy, abstract origin story

of the State that ended with a call to act "against imposed laws and for true freedom." The issue also included an obituary of Nisan Farber, critiques of socialist parties, a compilation of recent anarchist attacks, and detailed recipes for starting fires and constructing bombs using yellow phosphorous.

But most Chernoe Znamya anarchists were less busy writing stuff and more focused on planning attacks. In Warsaw in November, Sherka, Notka, and two others bombed a fancy hotel where the rich were holding a banquet to celebrate the end of the revolution. The action was intended, their comrade later wrote, "to remind the bourgeoisie that their celebration of victory over the bones and blood of tortured workers was premature." The bombers disappeared with the help of local anarchists and traveled to Odessa, where they linked up with Gelinker and Sherka's people and immediately got to work preparing an even bigger attack. Looking back on these days of ceaseless action, one conspirator recalled a precious moment of wonder and intimacy when she went with Sherka to test a bomb on the shores of the Black Sea:

"It was November, early morning, a strong wind was blowing. We walked along a beach, searching for a safe place for the test, a place from which we could easily disappear after the explosion. The sea was in a thundering rage. Waves, one after another, crashed against the rocky shore. Sherochka was completely spell-bound by the tempestuous sea.[7] With uncommon agility, she climbed up on a rock. The wind was ruffling her dress, her hair was disheveled, and her arms were extended towards the sea. 'Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho,' she cried joyfully at the top of her lungs, 'ho-ho-ho-ho-ho.' The waves, striking about the rock, splashed her with a cascade of foam. She embraced the sea with open arms. 'Here, little wave: More… More… More…' The bomb turned out to be successfully made—it exploded well. We ran back, wrapped in our shawls."

On December 17, three bombs were tossed into an upscale cafe where the city's nationalist elite were known to gather. The explosions demolished the facade and injured 5 members of the ruling class. Within hours, police spies had a name for the short-haired woman in the black cap who had thrown one of the bombs through the shop's window: Sherka. In a week, they tracked her down along with Notka and three others, though they weren't exactly easy targets. Sherka started shooting when the cops approached her and only stopped when she got knocked over by a bullet to the stomach. Two of her codefendants then managed to slip captivity: One escaped and fled to Switzerland, while Notka was released for lack of evidence after a bomb some friends delivered to the police station happened to destroy his file.

Fearing further escapes and incendiary outside support, authorities transferred the remaining prisoners to a high-security prison in Kiev. They were nervous about transporting Sherka to a hospital for the bullet fragments lodged in her stomach, so those got removed in the prison infirmary. While she healed and awaited trial, Sherka spent her time caring for her codefendant's toddler and finding creative ways to communicate with the other defendants in the men's block across the yard: Towels tied to cell bars meant all was OK; letters attached to bundles of gathered flowers could be tossed to a messenger below. As the months crawled by, the comrades did their best to keep each other's spirits up, but they all expected to die for their actions. It would be almost a year before the sentences came down.

[7] Sherochka is a loving nickname that the author, the legendary "grandmother of Russian anarchism" Olga Taratuta, uses for her comrade. Sherka referred to Olga as "mommy," and it was Olga's son who she helped care for while they were incarcerated together. To learn more about this heroic Jewish anarchist, check out NoBonzo's essay "Life of Olga Taratuta and Anna Stepanova."

In the meantime, Gelinker and a couple dozen others met in a city 100 miles from Odessa to discuss their next moves. Seeing how the Odessa project had turned out, many were inclined to pivot away from indiscriminate bombings, and there was discussion of focusing attacks on the mining industry. It's unclear whether anything came of this, but it is clear that a large part of Chernoe Znamya decided to return to their old tactics and take another stab at insurrection in Bialystok. Mostly, this looked like taking some revenge. In January 1906, a police official known for beating Jews in the birzhe was assassinated. A week later, a balebos who'd snitched on strikers during the rebellions was shot. In March, Gelinker and a comrade attacked two cops who'd participated in the July 30 massacre and followed that up by bombing another police station. Then in April, Bialystok was briefly rocked by the largest strike it had seen since the height of 1905. As a thousand angry workers took to the streets, anarchists seized on the momentum by doing what they did best: Within the strike's first three days, four balebatem's homes had gotten bombed.

Sadly, this new rebellious surge was nipped in the bud by swift repression. Throughout the spring of 1906 the police made a string of arrests, confiscating weapons and literature, trashing safe houses, sending many anarchists to the labor camps in Siberia, and sending a few of them straight to the gallows. The blow was enormous, and demoralization and isolation began to creep back in. One anarchist remembered a small, tense cemetery meeting when Gelinker admitted he was on the edge of collapse. He told his comrades he was "tired, worn out, and couldn't go on any longer. He needed to go abroad. To study. He didn't want to be a robot, he had to get away for a while to 'get his head straight.'" But whether he changed his mind or acted too slowly, he never did make it out of the empire. On May 9, 1906, Gelinker was at another meeting in the Jewish cemetery when police and soldiers descended. As soon as he spotted them, he started shooting. And he kept shooting, even when a bullet to the leg brought him to his knees, even when two more to the chest knocked him on his back, even as the soldiers charged at his bleeding body with their bayonets.

Gelinker's death sent ripples far beyond Bialystok. From the women's block of the Kiev prison, Sherka's codefendant remembered him as "an indefatigable, implacable fighter against private property and the state." From Switzerland, some Bialystok fugitives published a pamphlet commemorating "our eighteen-year-old comrade, beloved to us all." They wrote, "with everything that could be said about him, words will never be enough." And they weren't. In the days after his murder, his Bialystok comrades avenged him by attacking yet another police station and killing a cop. One of them recalled, "for Gelinker, we wouldn't abandon the battlefield. We would win or die fighting." They would need to keep this fighting spirit alive—because three weeks after Gelinker's death, the most devastating repression in living memory was unleashed on the Jews of Bialystok.

Antisemitism had been an explicit pillar of the empire's counter-insurgency strategy since the outset of the 1905 rebellions. When all else failed, the Tsar could always raise the specter of the foreign, traitorous, conniving Jew to redirect popular rage away from the truly powerful. Police in the capital operated an infamous printing press devoted solely to engulfing the revolutionary tide in a wave of antisemitism. Their chief editor was the Tsar's chief advisor, and by the end of 1905 he was busy churning out pamphlets calling on all "true Russians" to "rise and exterminate foreigners and Jews." Across the empire, a network of street-fighting monarchists calling themselves the Black Hundreds was beginning to do just that.

By the spring of 1906, Bialystok authorities were coordinating with these fascist militias to lay plans for a massive pogrom—a murderous anti-Jewish riot. The first order of business, funny enough, was to assassinate the chief of police. He had made it clear that, while he had no problems with his men terrorizing the Jewish poor in the name of law and order, he wasn't on board with loosing a Jew-killing mob on the city. So in May, high-ranking military officials got an ex-cop to kill him. The next step was to transport a bunch of angry Christian railroad workers to Bialystok and invite them, along with plenty of armed soldiers and crowbar-wielding fascists, to take part in two totally peaceful Christian processions marking Holy Thursday on June 1. When a hired gunman fired the pogrom-justifying shot at one of the marches, cries of "beat the Jews!" rang out, and suddenly, no one was there to celebrate Holy Thursday anymore.

The Bialystok pogrom lasted three terrifying days. Soldiers and cops joined non-uniformed fascists armed with axes, hammers, and knives to break down doors and murder entire families of Jews. Bodies were mutilated and dismembered, children were ransomed at gunpoint, and attics were methodically searched for hiding Jews. But the killing wasn't entirely indiscriminate: Military officers gave orders to leave the rich Jews untouched, focus on the poor, and keep an eye out for any Jews wearing black (the "uniform" of the anarchists). Police pointed out houses where they thought Jewish anarchists lived for targeted attacks, and shouts of "Jew!" became interchangeable with those of "anarchist!" But the one place the organizers of the pogrom most wanted to raid was the one place they couldn't access: the Surazer Street birzhe. There, battle groups of Jewish anarchists stood ready with bombs and revolvers in hand. When a company of soldiers rode up on horseback to take the birzhe on the first day of the pogrom, a torrent of explosions forced them to retreat, and they didn't return. From then on, whenever bands of fascists got near the homes of the Jewish poor on Surazer Street, anarchists greeted them with hails of bullets. In addition to confronting attackers, anti-fascist crews also ran around distributing food and medical aid to the mounting numbers of homeless and wounded Jews. Looking back, one resident estimated that "many more tragedies would have occurred had it not been for these self-defense groups."

On the final day of the pogrom, two veteran Jewish anarchists showed up from Vilne: Notka and Rivke. They had heard the news on the first day and immediately rushed back to defend their community, stopping only to recruit ten more comrades in Notka's hometown just outside Bialystok. When they got to the Bialystok train station, they found pogromists gathered to kill all the poor-looking Jews entering or fleeing the city, and they opened fire on the fascists. What happened next varies according to different accounts. I've read that Notka was captured and tortured to death by police without uttering a word, that Notka managed to shoot two cops before being riddled with bullets, and that Notka threw a bomb that took the two cops down with him. What is certain is that the anarchists at the train station were badly outnumbered, and while Rivke made it out alive, Notka did not. In a pamphlet commemorating Notka and all the comrades who fell in the pogrom, some anarchists wrote: "We will not take wreaths to their graves, but an oath to fight to the end for the ideal by which they lived and for which they died: for anarchism."

And they made good on this oath, immediately. In the wake of the killings, with between 100 and 200 Jews lying dead in the streets, both the anarchists and the authorities launched decisive attacks, beginning what would become the final phase of their years-long battle. The Tsarist government, frustrated that the Surazer Street birzhe still stood, wanted to finish what it had started and finally exterminate the rebellious Jews. For their part, the rebellious Jews wanted

nothing but revenge. On June 4, with the blood of the previous day's murders still fresh on the street, one of them shot a local fascist who had participated in the killing. Days later, another Jewish anarchist spotted the police spy who'd popularized hammering nails into Jews' heads riding in a horse-drawn carriage. He pulled the sadist from his seat and emptied his revolver into him. Soon after, the regional head of the Okhrana, the newly reorganized imperial secret police, was ripped to pieces by an anarchist's bomb.

The state's response came in July, and it marked the beginning of the end for the Bialystok anarchists. With orders from the (new) regional head of the Okhrana to "cleanse" Surazer Street and "liquidate" the birzhe, the police and the army began an exhaustive campaign of house raids. Each night, they surrounded the entire neighborhood while they conducted apartment-by-apartment searches, meticulously combing every tenement for anarchists. During the day, they carried out routine stop-and-frisks in the birzhe. For a while, the anarchists laid low. Many left to join itinerant fugitives sleeping in forests and barns and along riverbanks, stopping briefly in other cities to meet up with comrades and throw a bomb or two before disappearing again. With electric light systems popping up in the cities surrounding Bialystok, anarchists across the region increasingly kept to the shadows.

Then in September, soldiers were conducting a regular stop-and-frisk on some young workers crossing the birzhe when one of them pulled out a pistol and started firing. The teenager managed to wound a soldier before fleeing, but they soon caught up with him. Under torture, he told them only that he was an anarchist and that he regretted not killing them. Then they shot him dead. For a brief but brightly burning two months, rebellion was reignited as anarchists killed two cops, an Okhrana official, and the head of the Bialystok gendarmerie. But the spate of attacks subsided in November when, after a fierce gun battle, cops captured one of the primary assassins. Before his execution, he told the army lieutenant questioning him only this: "I made bombs. Last week, I prepared one for yourself, but it seems my comrades will have to finish this off for me."

That same month, Sherka was approaching her 22nd birthday inside the Kiev prison. She didn't feel there was much to celebrate, as she was still mourning the losses of Notka, Gelinker, and so many other comrades the state had taken from her over the past year of her incarceration. Her own sentencing was coming within days, and her codefendants decided that, if all of them were rewarded with years of captivity instead of death, they would hold a party for Sherka, full of flowers. On the day of the verdict, she was making breakfast for her codefendant's child and trying to console the others when she received a visit from her sister, who had the news. Two of the five defendants would get 17 years in Siberia. The remaining three, including Sherka, would be hanged. Visiting with the comrades condemned to death, one of the Siberia-bound defendants recalled: "They met me on the threshold quietly, joyously, and smiling brightly. Their faces shone with a very special, spiritual quality that came from within each of them. Faith—passionate faith in the deathless greatness of the idea of anarchism—sounded in their speech."

Early in the morning of the execution, a carriage arrived in the prison yard to take the three to the gallows. The cops brought a rabbi to join them in case they wanted a "spiritual counselor," which they didn't, but they did have a pleasant conversation. "All three" condemned Jews "spoke to me," the rabbi recalled, "but mainly the woman. Their beliefs, strong and deep, were based not on religion but on the doctrines of anarchism." Before parting, Sherka said: "Please tell our friends and comrades that we died untroubled and firm in our belief that our deaths will give birth to life. To a vast multitude of young lives! They raise the banner of anarchism which is falling from

our hands and continue our struggle." Then she calmly stepped out of the carriage and walked ahead of her comrades into the courtyard.

IV: Endings

Though they never fully recovered from the repressive blows of summer and fall 1906, the Jewish anarchists continued their activities in and around Bialystok through 1907. More Okhrana police and spies were killed, an attempt was made on the life of the governor, and most spectacularly, a transport of anarchist prisoners killed their captors and escaped after comrades passed them loaves of bread stuffed with revolvers. Fugitives from Bialystok brought weapons, pamphlets, and printing materials with them to other cities; the small circle of exiles in Switzerland continued printing propaganda and obituaries of fallen comrades under the name Buntar ("Rebel"). Rivke, still on the run after five years of anarchy, traveled the empire with false passports robbing the rich. In June, she helped convene a clandestine meeting to reconnect the small, isolated forces of anarchists at large, forming the short-lived Federation of Anarchist-Communists of Poland and Lithuania.

But a final wave of arrests and executions in summer of 1907 destroyed these efforts. Almost all the participants of the June convention were arrested within weeks, including Rivke, who upon being captured said at her trial "I do not speak with tyrants," and then remained silent. She was sentenced to ten years of forced labor. Over the next two months, scores of young Jewish anarchists were gunned down in shootouts, shot themselves with their last bullets, or defiantly mocked their military tribunals before being sent to the gallows. The government had to create a special prison for women rebels, half of them anarchists, in the remote eastern corner of its empire near the border with China. After two years of incarceration, Freyda was transported to this prison and found herself surrounded again by Jewish anarchists, including some of Sherka's closest Odessa comrades. In September, a lone anarchist who'd once helped Freyda run the Anarkhye printing press snuck back into Bialystok hoping to somehow prepare the way for more exiles to return. But even before a gunfight ended in his execution, he wrote to a comrade: "Nothing, literally nothing left in Bialystok. What a horror to see what is left of our historic Bialystok, which has consumed so many of our best youthful forces."

Anarchy in Bialystok never again reached the heights of the 20th century's opening years. When the city was incorporated into the independent state of Poland in 1918, national authorities spared no effort to ensure they didn't face the same threats as their former imperial occupiers. The surviving Bialystok anarchists are hard to pin down, and I could only catch glimpses of their remaining lives in the footnotes of other histories. Of those who remained in the Russian Empire, some fought in World War I, while others dodged the draft. Some joined the increasingly authoritarian Communist Party after the 1917 revolution, while others fought against them just as they had the Tsarist rulers, robbing the newly nationalized banks to fund new anarchist journals. Those who emigrated lived in London, New York, Chicago, Berlin, and Buenos Aires. Some joined the Industrial Workers of the World in their new homes. Others settled into quiet lives, sharing the secrets of their teenage years with no one.

Zeydl was eventually released from imperial prison due to lack of evidence and headed to France. But he was soon exiled for getting up to anarchy and fled to Germany, where he was again exiled for getting up to more anarchy and fled to the Netherlands, where he disappears from the

historical record. Rivke also went back to doing anarchy after being released from prison, and the Communist Party imprisoned her twice before exiling her to Uzbekistan, where she supported herself by sowing and organized an underground anarchist journal. By 1930 she was back in the Soviet Union helping to set up the Confederation of Anarchists in Ukraine, but she was likely sent to the Gulag and killed because she vanishes after 1934. Freyda escaped Siberia in 1908 and fled abroad, living in at least five different countries before returning when the 1917 revolution broke out. She joined the Communist Party for a time while working as a janitor, but she clearly made some communists unhappy somewhere along the line. In 1938, Freyda was arrested by Soviet secret police and sent to the Gulag, where she, too, disappears from history.

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The Jewish Insurrectionary Anarchists of Bialystok
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