

A Short History of Anarchism in Brussels

Part 1 (1830–1900)

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This text is the first part of three zines on the history of anarchism in Brussels, in an effort to promote its memory both here and abroad.

It is part of the history of the international social movements, the local proletariat, the different emancipatory struggles and the revolutionary processes in Belgium. It is based on a collection of pre-existing resources, combined into a digestible, coherent narrative. Because this was just meant to be a zine, there was little research done based on primary sources (to generate new information) or particular effort paid to settling historical contradictions and debates. You'll forgive me if you find that some information is incomplete or missing. My aim was to bring you a basic understanding of our local history, without immediately turning this into a fat book. Choices were made, certainly influenced by my stronger identification with anarcho-communism.

The following text is unfortunately very dominated by cis men. This is due to several reasons: Prevailing sexism within different anarchist movements, societal pressures keeping women and queer people out of public politics, a lack of available sources on figures less in the spotlight, the patriarchal reflexes of anarchist historiography (including my own), and the absence of archives due to political repression of anarchist, queer and feminist movements. I hope that this text will inspire new research into overlooked organisers and forgotten groups. For those interested in picking up this task, you can find a list of anarchist women active in Brussels at the end of this zine. As we live in a time of increasing hopelessness and despair, we remember the past to imagine the future. We are inspired by the revolutionary dreams and struggles that have lived, just like we will inspire new generations.

What does “Anarchism” mean?

I am not sure if it is possible to give a real “definition” of anarchism. It is often said that there are just as many anarchism-s as there are anarchists. As we will see in this zine/booklet, there are many different ideological currents. Each have their own histories, even if they are often intertwined. Thus, the following explanation is my own interpretation.

The word “Anarchism” comes from the greek terms “an-arkos”, meaning the absence of power or domination. Originally used to refer to a state of chaos and lawlessness, it was appropriated by the first libertarian socialist or “anarchist” thinkers. Indeed, they had realised that the violence and suffering rife in their societies was not the result of an absence of “order” or “power”. Instead, it came forth from the structures of oppression and inequality. Domination of humans over humans (and humans over non-human nature) created inequality, hatred and suffering. Instead of bringing prosperity to the poor, capitalist industrialisation had thus brought them only misery.

Capitalism, colonialism, organised religion, imperialism and patriarchy are all systems rooted in hierarchical violence, enabling the rich and the powerful to exploit the impoverished working classes and other vulnerable groups, appropriating the fruits of their labour and depriving them of the means necessary for survival. Those who are hungry, fearful and wounded then have little choice but to use violence to secure the resources they need, often becoming oppressors themselves to those in weaker positions. The collection of institutions that we call the “State” (the police forces, courts, government, parliament, military, taxation system, etc.) are not here to protect these “wretched of the earth”.

On the contrary; The primary function and design of the State is to maintain “order” for the upper classes, by preventing the abolition of privilege and inequality. The State and its institutions secure their interests through the use of violence: riot police, prisons, psychiatric asylums, economic sanctions, fines, bailiffs, forced conscription, forced labour, cultural suppression, expropriation, banishment, deportation, corporal punishment, slavery, concentration camps, executions, war, genocide. The State, its elites and its institutions only possess this power because of the historical dispossession and exploitation of the working class, women, and colonised peoples.

Anarchists believe that all humans (and other beings) should live in freedom and equality (equity), in a society rid of hierarchies and interpersonal domination, providing for everyone’s material needs. This society is what we call “Socialism” or “Communism”. But contrary to the Marxists, (most) anarchists believe that this cannot be achieved through a capture of State power. They think that the dismantling of the hierarchical systems of oppression, especially the State, is a necessary (first) step in the construction of this better world. That utopian societal way of being, were all structures of domination have disappeared, is what we call “Anarchy”.

This ideal can be interpreted in many different ways. How is anarchism to be built, implemented or imagined? The more “organisational” currents (anarchist communism, anarcho-syndicalism, platformism, synthesism, neo-platformism, especifismo, etc.) focus on a project of societal transformation, often built around the ideal of proletarian revolution. Some focus on community-building and achieving autonomy, escaping from the claws of Capitalism and State power. The question of the legitimacy of violence (which can be a tool of liberation but also of domination) has led to the rise of both pacifist and violent insurrectional currents.

Others approach anarchism from a more personal, individualist, moral or existential point of view. Many prioritise the immediate abolition of hierarchy and domination. Some are anti-organisational or embrace nihilistic positions, because they find that even the “revolutionary” structures function in oppressive ways. Personal freedom should be maximised, and even “democratic” decisions, taken by a majority, should never be imposed on individuals.

Often easily dismissed because of their relatively smaller numbers throughout history, individualist anarchists have in fact had a profound impact on many artistic, cultural, counter-cultural and philosophical currents. They influenced major cultural movements, introducing, reinventing or strengthening ideas and practices like veganism and vegetarianism, feminism, queer liberation, forms of birth control like abortion and vasectomies, atheism and esotericism, polygamy and free love, naturism, autonomist experiences, punk, squatting, ecologist developments and antimilitarism.

The following text will give you a better view on how these movements constantly interact, clash or merge to create new ideas. Anarchists never stand in isolation from society. Their hopes and ambitions are defined by their material and social conditions, with anarchists from different social classes, places and timeframes embracing very different ideological projects. They are always influenced by other ideas, depending on the political situation. Many, like progressive liberalism, marxism, syndicalism, democratic socialism, christian worker movements, feminism, anti-fascism, anti-colonialism and ecologism had a profound impact on anarchist development.

This is the story of the Anarchists of Brussels. Enjoy.

Welcome to Brussels

You might have heard of our city. Brussels is one of the capitals of the Euro-American Empire. It is home to the NATO headquarters, the European Parliament, and dozens of other imperial institutions. It is the Belgian and Flemish capital, and even has its own government and administrative area. There are over a million inhabitants, who form one of the most diversified populations on the planet. It's a huge cultural melting pot, deeply hated by the international reactionary forces.

Brussels rose from the swamps of the Zenne river around the 9th century CE. But there are traces of prehistoric settlements, Gallo-Roman villas, and Frankish villages that go back far beyond that time. The tale of Saint-Gery, a bishop from Cambrai (France) who killed two dragons by the riverside, symbolises the region's violent conversion to Christianity. It is believed that "Brussels" derives its name of the early Brabantian words "Broek" and "Zeel" or "Bruoc-sella", designating a house, a room, a gathering place or a settlement in the swamp.

Brussels started out as a trading settlement, close to a merchant route between the West-Flandrian coastal ports and Köln. The establishment of a fortified stronghold marks the official foundation of the city. The first town was built on several islands on the Zenne river, then expanded onto the hillside on the right bank. Ruled by the lords of Leuven, Brabant, Flanders and Burgundy, it slowly managed to gain prominence as a medieval merchant city. This gave rise to an aristocratic class, followed by the development of an economic bourgeoisie. Villages like Schaerbeek, Etterbeek, Molenbeek, Saint-Gilles, Anderlecht and Saint-Josse-ten-Noode emerged in the city's growing shadow, encompassing the Maelbeek, Meulebeek and Woluwe rivers. A large port developed around the Sainte-Catherine area.

From the 16th century onwards, Brussels turned into a provincial capital. A succession of imperialist rulers from across Western Europe developed its central administrative position and industrial potential. A large canal was dug to connect it to the bigger rivers up north. Workshops and manufactories appeared all around. As the elite grew wealthier, the city attracted and created deeply impoverished populations. This urban proletariat lived in miserable conditions, at the bottom of the valleys. There, the now heavily polluted rivers provoked catastrophic floods and constant epidemics. Crime, violence, child labour and sexual exploitation flourished. In times of war, armies raided and pillaged the villages right outside the city walls, followed by massacres amongst the population. The advent of the Industrial Revolution only exacerbated their hardships. The successive political regimes forced the urban proletariat into the new workhouses and factories, imposed ever more taxes and expanded their political control.

After the Belgian Revolution against the Dutch monarchy in 1830, famines hit the rural countryside due to crop failures. From all over the region, people fled towards the cities. The population of Brussels exploded. The city engulfed the adjacent villages, and huge palaces and bourgeois neighbourhoods arose along the hilltops. Despite the revolutionary efforts of the city's proletariat, the newly established Belgian state was ruled by a triple alliance: the liberal bourgeoisie, the conservative Catholics and the Francophone aristocracy. Under British influence, they proclaimed a "parliamentary monarchy", in which only a few thousand rich white men had a right to vote. Brussels was now the capital of a buffer state, stuck between the German, French, British and Dutch empires. The liberal component of its constitution enabled political dissidents from these countries to find temporary refuge in Belgium. But they were expelled as soon as they engaged

into public political activities. The parliament served the bourgeoisie, as competing catholic and liberal factions battled over power and influence.

The new kings and governments were hungry for power. They helped organise mass industrialisation, with Belgium becoming the second industrialised region in Western Europe. This was not just possible because of Belgium's strategic location and geography, or because of the historical ties between British capitalist networks and the Flandrian countryside. Belgium sat upon a goldmine. A coal mine, to be precise. Like a Qatar of the 19th century, the seemingly infinite coal reserves, steel and timber from the Walloon forests enabled the small country to punch far above its weight, becoming one of Europe's most productive manufacturing hubs. And when they lacked the primary resources, like rare minerals and exotic crops, needed for such intense capitalist productivity, they found a solution on the African continent.

In 1885, Belgium's king Leopold II secured European support for his conquest of the Congo-River Basin. He unleashed a genocidal ultra-capitalist imperial onslaught onto the peoples of Central Africa. In Belgium, he used his wealth to order the construction of massive monuments, infrastructure projects and wealthy areas on top of the unruly popular neighbourhoods. These were expropriated and destroyed as their population was forcibly displaced to new areas. The rise of the Belgian bourgeoisie and aristocracy was intertwined with the colonial ventures, and until today the wealth of Belgium's richest families is inseparable from the pillaging of the Congo region. The exploitation and ethnic cleansing of the peoples across the Congo strengthened the exploitation of the workers within Belgium.

The mass extraction of natural resources enabled the consolidation of state power and unlimited multiplication of factories. In turn, these made the continued imperial expansion possible, feeding it weapons, armoured vehicles, print propaganda, medication and capital, along with desperate humans ready to serve as colonial workers, miners, sailors, mercenaries, soldiers, nurses, administrators and missionaries.

It is in this historical context that the first anarchists of Brussels appeared. But the city already had a long history of popular insurrections, proto-communist experiences, temporary autonomy and failed revolutions. Brussels saw medieval workers rise up against unfair distributions of power, women's communities secure financial self-sufficiency, mass celebrations challenge state authority, popular neighbourhoods push back professional armed forces, and much more. These stories and practices should be rediscovered, reclaimed, and inspire our movements.

1830 — 1850: The emergence of Socialism and Anarchism

In 1822, the utopian socialist thinker Charles Fourier described the valleys of Brussels as an ideal setting for the establishment of a "phalanx", an autonomous experimental commune, in his book "The Phalanstery". Inspired by the communal life of Christian monasteries, he proposed the creation of self-sufficient cooperative communities to improve workers' lives. From 1830 onwards, a fringe of the liberal political factions that participated in the Belgian Revolution radicalised their thirst for freedom. The unruly city of Brussels became one of the first places where the libertarian ideas of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon took hold, and where they encountered other non-authoritarian socialist concepts.

In 1834, the disciples of the French preacher Saint-Simon arrived in Belgium, professing freedom and the "community of goods and women". The Saint-Simonians believed in positivist

science, free trade and enterprise, an industrialisation guided by morality to achieve collective happiness, and an “aristocracy of talent” instead of birth to administer the country in the best interest of all. Soon, violence erupted across the city. Mobs prevented any expression by the Saint-Simonians, breaking the furniture and beating up those who dared defend their ideas. The police had promised them protection. It instead watched on as a woman was dragged into the city hall, undressed, tied to a tree and whipped by the Catholics. After seeking refuge in Liège, the Saint-Simonians came back and opened a salon in the city centre. The new “church” held daily meetings and offered separate courses for “men, women and workers”. They promised the imminent arrival of a better society, where the proletariat would be liberated from its suffering.

Pioneers of socialism also appeared amongst the locals. Like Jacob Kats, a weaver’s son born around Antwerp, that only learned to read at 18 years old. He started organising worker meetings and political theatre plays in the “Marollen” neighbourhood. His script “Het Aerdsch Paradys” might be the first Utopian socialist text written in Dutch. Supported by French luminaries and veterans of the Belgian revolution, he started the satirical outlet “Uylenspiegel”, and quickly came under state security’s surveillance. His “Den Waren Volksvriend” was the first Flemish workers’ publication, herald of a bygone movement for Flemish emancipation still defined by progressive ideals and class consciousness.

Kats was repeatedly arrested, receiving international solidarity. Financially broke after another stay in prison, he was shunned by the city centre’s bar owners. He thus restarted his meetings and theatre plays close to “Saintelette Square”, at the “Salon de Monplaisir”. This became the first “Maison du Peuple” of Belgium, with visits from foreigners like Karl Marx, Michael Bakunin and Friedrich Engels. Hundreds of workers attended the rowdy speeches of the Brussels agitator. In 1848, police raided his home, confiscating his writings on a new Belgian constitution, and a natural right to a basic income based on communal ownership of the land. In “Werk and Kapitaal”, Kats argued that Work and Capital were the two main pillars of human society. He believed that a harmonious relationship could be established between masters and workers, through a system of associations that would equally divide the entirety of profits.

From June to July 1843, the Russian revolutionary Bakunin lived in Brussels after his expulsion from Paris. He refused the demand of the Russian ambassador that he return to the homeland. He was thus stripped of his titles of nobility and sentenced in absentia to forced labour in Siberia.

In 1847, the “Deutsche Brüsseler Zeitung”, held an international workers’ banquet. This revolutionary newspaper was ran by German socialist refugees fleeing the empire, part of a much bigger German-speaking community in exile. Its most famous members were Marx and Engels. Amongst the guests at the banquet was an unidentified Russian, possibly again Bakunin. He had stayed in the city between November 1847 and January 1848, spending time with the German exiles, Polish immigrants and the Belgian liberal and socialist thinkers. The utopian socialist Joseph Charlier also lived here. He decried private land ownership as unjust and advocated for an equal distribution of all revenue to satisfy basic needs, with higher pay according to the difficulty of working conditions.

The period following Belgian independence was highly unstable. The European potato famine (1845–1850) scorched the surrounding countryside, triggering refugee waves from the provinces of West and East Flanders. Dutch reconquest, German expansionism and French annexation remained a constant danger. Discontent amongst the people soon turned into anger. In 1848, a wave of revolutions shook the European continent. It was the “Spring of the Peoples”. Bakunin was still in Brussels when he heard news of the popular uprisings in France.

He had come to despise the German socialists (like Marx and Engels) living in the Belgian capital, preferring the Polish refugees. When the second French Republic was proclaimed, he rushed to Paris. There, a bold plan sought to export the Spring of the Peoples to Belgium. Thousands of Belgian immigrant workers living in Paris were gathered, armed, and transported to the northern border by train. They formed an improvised revolutionary army that would march on the Belgian capital after crossing into the country and taking the city of Kortrijk. Daily protests erupted on the Grand-Place in support of the revolutionary forces.

But the “Belgian Legion” was intercepted and defeated at the “Battle of Risquons-tout” (Let-us-Risk-Everything). The republican leaders were sentenced to death, and communist agitators like Karl Marx were arrested and deported. Chaos continued.

In Brussels, a mob of sturdy port-workers nicknamed the “Vaartkapoenen” (canal sweethearts), joined with inhabitants of the “Vismet” (fishmarket) neighbourhood and crashed a 1000-person banquet held in Molenbeek, attacking the local socialist politicians. In 1854, mass riots erupted against the bread shortages. The bakeries were sacked and looted, until the army deployed into the streets to crush the rebels.

In 1858, Proudhon appeared in person and joined his supporters. He lived in exile in Brussels, fleeing the persecution of leftist intellectuals in France by the emperor Napoleon III. He refused a general amnesty in 1859. At the start of 1862, the great Russian writer, christian anarchist and pacifist Leo Tolstoy visited him in Brussels on his trip through Western Europe. Proudhon deeply influenced the local socialists, but his articles criticising the Italian unification set him in a bad light. The Italian nationalists were very popular amongst Belgian and French revolutionaries. When Proudhon explained that their nationalist arguments could be used by Napoleon III to annex Belgium, the local press panicked. Proudhon was accused of supporting France’s expansionism. Crowds gathered around his apartment screaming “Vive la Belgique!” and “Down with the Annexationists!”. Disappointed, Proudhon returned to Paris in 1862.

But libertarian socialism had arrived. Brussels was described by the anarchist historian Max Nettiau as the only solid base of the libertarian cause at the time. Of particular interest was the group “Le Peuple”, who published “La Tribune du Peuple”. The young, well-educated socialist César De Paepe became a prominent member. He formulated a slow, reformist strategy to realise anarchism over the long term. His companions were more radical, as the “Le Peuple” group gradually transformed into a local section of the “Socialist International”. A more explicit ideal of anarchism, a “revolutionary Proudhonism”, was proclaimed by French and Belgian students and political refugees gathered around the group “Rive Gauche” (Left Bank). Within the worker syndicates, republicans called the “French Proudhonists” expanded their influence. Amongst them was Henri Tolain, one of the co-founders of the Socialist International, later excluded for opposing the Paris Commune. They settled for the weaker and more moderate ideals of Proudhon, attracting mockeries from the communists adhering to Karl Marx’s positions.

1865 — 1875: The Commune and the International

In 1867, the group around the newspaper “La Liberté”, amongst whom the Proudhonian socialist politicians Hector Denis and Victor Arnould, promoted the establishment of a workers’ parliament. An organisation operating outside of the State, directly linked with the economic base of the country. It was called the “Labour Representation”, and gained momentum until the

eruption of the Paris Commune in 1871. In 1868, a library called “A. Rozez” distributed the journal “La Lanterne”, written by the Parisian revolutionary Henri Rochefort. The library specialised in writings against Napoleon III, as part of a phenomenon which profoundly angered French authorities; the promotion of revolutionary thought from the safety of Belgium by socialist and anarchist refugees.

Bakunin was present at the 1868 Brussels congress of the republican “League for Peace and Freedom”, including many politicians, economists and philosophers like Garibaldi and Stuart Mill. While it was aimed at building an overarching European structure, he proposed that they join the Socialist International. This was rejected, and the next congress of the League openly opposed the economic and social equality of classes and individuals. As said, the Brussels section of the International had emerged from the Proudhonist group *Le Peuple*. It focused on mutual aid between consumers, cooperative societies and worker unions. But it was afraid of factory strikes, and even rejected them, fearing the violence and inevitable repression these brought along. It sought instead to build a movement that could create solidarity, impact social conditions, and even influence political choices. This cautious line of action was criticised by the more radical “revolutionary” elements, who started gathering around a rival newspaper called “*La Nouvelle Tribune du Peuple*”.

During the 1868 Brussels Congress of the Socialist International, De Paepe campaigned for the doctrine of socialisation of the land. But he warned that a central government would gain too much power if entrusted with this responsibility. Instead, he advocated for an “economic state”, not in the hands of a governing minority, but of the entire citizenry. He warned that otherwise, the productivist associations would quickly start behaving like property owners themselves. He also presented a letter from the absent Bakunin, arguing for the abolition of all hereditary property, defending the common ownership of the land, if the community was represented by a federation of free communes. Accepting the ideal of collectivisation, and later of the abolition of hereditary property, the International didn’t agree on the federalist principle.

In later congresses, Belgian delegates like the Molenbeek-born journalist Eugène Hins continued supporting Bakunin’s side. But in 1869, two strikers were killed by the military police in the Walloon town of Seraing. In April, an uprising followed in Frameries, in the industrialised Hainaut province, where a thousand workers confronted the Belgian army. Again, three were shot dead. The Belgian section of the First International condemned the repression and organised well-attended meetings. Still advising against the spontaneous strikes, they called on the workers to form associations and join the International. On the 16th of April, Hins and other prominent socialists were arrested. The repression pushed the Belgian section of the International into a schism, mixing politics with personal rivalries. The leadership of the anarchist-leaning Brismée, supported by his sons-in-laws De Paepe and Hins, became contested by an alliance of socialist dissidents, from moderate factions to the revolutionary fringes. Financial mismanagement, factional tensions, ideological disputes and organisational issues within the Belgian section of the International led to its progressive collapse. Many Belgians actively shifted between Proudhonist, Marxist and Bakuninist positions.

In the Spring of 1871, the French emperor Napoleon III was defeated by the Prussian armies and Paris was besieged. A new French government signed a treaty with the Prussians. But the guards and conscripts that defended Paris refused to obey, arrested their commanders, elected new ones and established their own governing body. When the French government tried to seize the Parisian cannons, the population intervened, secured the artillery and took possession of

thousands of guns. The Paris Commune raised the red revolutionary flag on the 18th of March. For 72 days, Paris stood as a Republic of Workers, while other revolutionary Communes erupted in cities like Marseille, Lyon, Narbonne, Saint-Etienne, Brest and Le Creusot. Besieged and surrounded, it was eventually vanquished by the governmental forces. Up to 20.000 communards were massacred by the armies of Versailles.

This revolutionary Paris was also a Belgian affair. Not only did a large Belgian immigrant population live in the Parisian popular neighbourhoods and countryside, but hundreds of volunteers also crossed the border and travelled towards the Commune once the revolution erupted. A “Belgian Federal Legion” was created, with the Brussels-born Georges Melotte amongst those calling for their compatriots to come join the Commune. At the fall of the city, 737 Belgian communards were arrested by the troops of Versailles, making it the biggest group of non-French arrestees. Merely having a foreign-sounding name often warranted summary executions. Many of these volunteers were originally from Brussels, often with Flemish origins.

Like Louis Dekeyser, former Brussels policeman, captain and flag-bearer of the 234th federal unit; Gaspard Dewever, caught by the Brussels police in 1877 while bragging about his time as a sergeant of the Commune; Constant Van Brempt, deported to New Caledonia for ten years after his arrest, along with many comrades, like the syndicalist Albin Villeval; Jean-Baptiste Devick, metalworker, sergeant of the Parisian national guard and federal lieutenant; Joseph Pint, caporal of the Montrouge Volunteers; Joseph Fris and Theodore Willems, who fought on the barricades during the Parisian last stand; Joseph Bourdon presented himself as a vagabond to the Belgian police, before admitting that he had been a communard and had escaped from a prison in Nancy. Women from Brussels also participated, like Blondine Snoeck, accused of involvement in the execution of several Versailles soldiers, Pétronille Kindermans, war widow and cook in the Commune, or Angeline Vanden Borre, described as a pétroleuse by the Belgian police. After the defeat of the Paris Commune and the horror of the Semaine Sanglante, Brussels became an important refuge for the Communards. Around 2000 fugitives settled in the city, mostly in the central neighbourhoods.

Adèle Lebleu, the “31-year-old petrol-bomber”, was one of 16 French women identified amongst them. Many passed by the house of the great writer Victor Hugo, who pleaded for their amnesty, before being expelled from Belgium himself. The Proudhonian newspaper “La Liberté” protested against this persecution, as its writers met the Parisians at the Café “Mille Colonnes” or in the city’s Royal galleries. The Communards strengthened the local socialist organisations and leftist newspapers. Because many were artists and specialised manual workers, they even contributed to the new monumental architecture of the city. In 1872, the Anti-Authoritarian faction was expelled from the Socialist International during the Congress in The Hague. Bakunin responded to the Marxists in the Brussels paper “La Liberté”. His anger at the “authoritarians” can be felt through the text:

“To allege that a group of individuals, even should they be the most intelligent and most well-meaning of individuals, will have the capacity to perform as the brains, the soul, the directing, unifying will of the revolutionary movement and the economic organization of the world’s proletariat, is such an affront to common sense and historical experience, that one wonders, in amazement, how a fellow as intelligent as Mr. Marx could have come up with it.”

Following the foundational Anti-Authoritarian International of Saint-Imier, its second/third congress was held in Brussels, in 1874. For the first time, a German delegation was present. The Italians didn’t come, busy preparing a Bakuninist anarchist uprising in Bologna. But in Brussels,

it became clear that nothing united the different delegations. Their only real point of agreement was the rejection of Karl Marx's centralising tactics.

The old divisions between libertarians and authoritarians were still present, and no consensus was found concerning questions like political action, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the destiny and role of the state, and a possible transitional period. A part of the Belgians, along with the Spanish delegations, defended a purist anarchism. Others, led by De Paepe, advocated for an intermediary position, in line with his later switch to reformist state socialism.

De Paepe proposed a plan based on Proudhon's federalism: a society organised in a network of emancipated communes, federations of communes, and a worldwide federation of federations. These communes would appoint their own executive officers, control the police and deal with all political matters, taking away from the State the power of legislation, justice, public safety, guaranteeing of contracts, protection of the helpless, local public services and the activities of civil life. He used the word "state" to define his idea of supra-communal organisation. This State would be left to deal with the public services requiring forms of centralisation, like public education and scientific progress. The world federation would then be tasked with the general coordination of the federations, and scientific advancements like the "irrigation of the Sahara". Still, De Paepe failed to explain how the transition to this new society would come about.

The efforts to reach decisions without offending anybody only deepened the divisions and hastened the decay of the Saint-Imier International. The Belgians clashed internally on the question of mutualism (worker-ownership, economic de-centralisation, non-exploitative free market and private property) versus collectivism (collective ownership, centralisation through the state/commune, planned economy). The cracks between authoritarian socialists, anarchists and social democrats were quickly becoming an abyss.

1875 — 1885: Longing for Revolution

In the mid-1870's, we also see the rise of a generation of local anarchists, less depended on the activities of the French refugees. Amongst them were several prominent militants, who would have a huge influence on the relatively small movement. These anarchists were impatient. They had seen and felt the violence of the state. They knew its willingness to use barbaric repression against the international proletariat. They expected the revolution to come at any moment, as Europe had seen decade after decade of popular insurrections. Thus, they considered non-temporary political organisations to stand in the way of the imminent and inevitable collapse of state and capital.

Alexandre Collignon, a young woodworker and carpet-maker, had committed to the social revolution at the age of 17. Before embracing anarchism, he was active in the authoritarian organisations. He then became a member of the "Frères de l'ABC", the "Comité Exécutif Socialiste", the "Groupe Secret d'Action Révolutionnaire" and the "Cercle des Anarchistes Bruxellois". He called for direct attacks, assassinations and bombings against the Royal Palace and the parliament, which he called "pre-revolutionary terror", to destabilise the country and prepare for the coming of the next French Revolution.

Xavier "Reivax" Stuyck came from the Blanquist groups. Since Auguste Blanqui's stay in the city, these sought to bring about socialism through the work of a revolutionary vanguard and secret societies, who would provoke insurrections and take leadership of the masses. Reivax had

a small shop in Saint-Josse-ten-Noode. He soon turned to anarchism. As a multilingual militant, he had good contacts with both Flanders and Germany, and became one of the main organisers of Brussels. Reminiscent of Blanquist thought, he called for the creation of democratic-revolutionary “societies” in every regional capital, who would then form smaller subordinated “societies” in every city. Two congresses a year would be held in Brussels to coordinate their efforts. He called for the distribution of weapons to the workers instead of charity, and rejected individualism in favour of an anarcho-communist collectivism.

Égide Govaerts too was quite the character. He progressively discovered socialism after being expelled from the military. He was a street merchant, garment worker and typographer, a little red-haired man walking around with a big oakwood club. He had been a member of the First International and the radical group “Les Cosmopolitains”, before joining many different anarchist formations. In 1880, he became the secretary of the Belgian section of the International. He called for secret movements and Propaganda by the Deed. He hoped to establish the Brussels Commune and declared his readiness to kill policemen. He wrote for a bunch of anarchist papers, in both French and Dutch, and was considered the main anarchist organiser of Brussels by the police from 1880 onwards. But his comrades started to suspect him of spying, which now accessible police archives disprove, but still led to his isolation.

In June 1874, a mechanic and anarchist called Charles De Buygher attracted the attention of the Brussels police. During a meeting of the International, he had offered himself as a guarantor for the communard-in-exile Henri Joineaux. As he had lived in Paris, De Buygher supported the French refugees through the “Pret Mutuel” and spoke at commemorations of the commune by the group “L’Égalité”. Despite being an anarchist, he took part in the Brussels and Verviers congresses of the International in late 1874.

Criticising the centralism of the general council, he advocated for the autonomy of the national federations. In January 1875, he joined the Brussels committee of the International and was tasked with writing a manifesto destined to the miners of the Borinage region. He later became a member of Les Cosmopolitains, and joined the “Ligue Collectiviste Anarchiste de Bruxelles” in 1879–1880. Achille Hertschap, another member of this group, represented the “Jeunesse Socialiste Révolutionnaire du Sablon” at the 1880 Revolutionary Congress in Verviers, also attended by De Buygher. The latter then joined the short-lived “Drapeau Rouge” in march 1880, the “Union Révolutionnaire Belge” in 1880–1881, the newspaper “La Justice Sociale” in 1881, and the “Ligue Républicaine Socialiste” at the end of the year. These organisations had members like Hubert Delsaute, Jan Pellerin, Charles Delfosse, Eugène Steens and Laurent Verrycken. Active in the most radical political circles of Brussels, De Buygher’s career illustrates their failure to create a lasting organisational structure, plagued by tensions between the old members of the International, the revolutionary socialists and the anarchists.

The failures of the International caused Belgian anarchism to stagnate. Reduced in numbers and capacity, the remaining militants began to rely on the socialists to organise meetings and events. They hoped to sway the masses in their favour by improvised disruptions and fiery speeches. But the anarchists were overall sidelined by the growing reformist and “evolutionist” socialist currents, who pushed for gradual change through participation in parliamentary politics. De Buygher’s efforts to radicalise the reformist organisations, hoping to build a revolutionary alternative to the social-democrats, found little success. In Brussels, splinter groups like the francophone “Cercle Anarchiste”, “l’Union Anarchiste de Bruxelles” and the Dutch-speaking

“Vereenigde Anarchisten”, remained in the margins. In 1881, the Verviers-born feminist anarchist Hubertine Ruwette was recorded spreading propaganda in Brussels with a girlfriend.

These early 1880’s also show the profound relationship between anarchism, migration, and repression, a constant feature of our story. In August 1879, the German revolutionary Johann Most arrived from London to give a series of conferences. Once a social-democratic figure, this man had spent years in jail for his work as an agitator and active opponent to the German reformist leaders. Most was arrested a day later, and deported through the port of Oostende. In March 1881, the famous anarchist Errico Malatesta was arrested in Brussels and expelled from Belgium too. In May, he sent copies of his newspaper “L’Insurrezzione” to Brussels, explaining his insurrectional programme:

“Anything that facilitates and brings the time of the insurrection nearer, is good; all that keeps it away, though maintaining the appearance of progress, is bad. This is the principle that will guide us.”

In June, Malatesta was again arrested in the city and again expelled from the country, after which he again moved to London. Sources on Malatesta’s presence are vague. He published two letters with Brussels as location, and is mentioned along with the Marxist-anarchist leader Carlo Canfiero. He was apparently expelled on suspicion of his involvement with the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. Another story even describes him challenging Marx’s disciple Paul Lafarge to a duel here, after his release from prison in Paris. Lafarge had publicly criticised the Spanish anarchists, despite their deaths, sacrifices and suffering for the libertarian cause. His comrade Francesco Ginnasi, banished from Switzerland, stayed a few months in Brussels too, before moving to England to escape an Italian arrest warrant. In autumn 1882, the visit of Louise Michel triggered troubles in Ghent.

In 1883, two young French anarchists from Lyon, called Paul Métayer and Antoine Cyvoct, were on the way to the woods of Ganshoren, when a fatal accident occurred. As Métayer slipped and fell, the home-made bomb he carried under his jacket, meant for a test trial, exploded. On his deathbed, Métayer remained silent, surrounded by policemen. The Antwerp newspaper “De Opstand” commented: “This is how the anarchists die”. The Belgian press accused the pair of planning an attempt against King Leopold II, ordered by a group called “Revolution Cosmopolite et Sociale”. Police raids happened in Brussels, Saint-Josse-ten-Noode and Verviers, and twenty arrests were made in anarchist and socialist circles.

Gregoire Federscher AKA Isaac Imboschi, an anarchist of Russian or Romanian origins, was apprehended for using false names. Panicked by the discovery of Russian revolutionary networks, the secret services linked the group to a Ukrainian branch of “Nardnaja Volja” (People’s Will), the revolutionary movement that had killed Tsar Alexander II. The Belgian state security contacted the Russian “Ochraha”, the brutal Tsarist secret police. Brussels and Saint-Petersburg from then on actively collaborated to track down Russian political refugees.

The funeral of Métayer brought out the local anarchists. Some 80 militants attended, as Egide Govaerts gave the funerary speech. Antoine Cyvoct, meanwhile, was deported to France, and later sentenced to death. In 1884, the Parisian Anarchist Henri Fruitier AKA Lucas raged against the idea of universal suffrage, generalised voting rights, a key objective for the reformist currents as they believed that the overwhelming demographic majority of workers would carry the socialist party to power. Lucas denounced the cowardice of the Brussels reformist leaders, who used the workers for their own interests, and had allowed the deportation of Cyvoct.

After his own arrest and expulsion, he returned to the city to interrupt a “progressist” meeting. He jumped on the table, enticing a part of the workers to start a spontaneous demonstration under the slogan “Vive la Révolution Sociale!”. One of his friends edited the local newspaper “La Bombe”. These Brussels anarchists of the mid-1880’s were mostly craft artisans, confronted with poverty, and not very involved in theoretical production. One text did call for the establishment of guerilla units and legitimised the executions of the exploitative class, as they themselves had rained death upon the proletariat. In January 1884, the French anarchist Louis Chautant was hosted by a cabaretier called Debleumortier right next to the Grand-Place, along with several other expatriates. In February, he attended an anarchist conference at “La Colline”, organised by “La Liberté”, and called for the murders of the bosses.

By 1885, the anarchists had regained strength, as the mythology of anarchism and Propaganda by the Deed grew across Europe. This new strategy sought to destabilise the ruling order through spectacular revolutionary actions. From throwing up barricades, organising strikes and holding demonstrations, the Propaganda by the Deed gradually escalated, from bank robberies to armed uprisings and political terrorism. Most notably, anarchists carried out bombings and assassinations against heads of state, royal families and government members, capitalists and military personnel, in order to create the necessary sparks to start worker revolutions everywhere. These anarchists often sacrificed themselves for their cause, or used the following high-profile trials as a platform to proclaim their revolutionary message. New temporary organisations appeared in Brussels, like the “Vlaamsche Opstandelingen” and the “Jeunesse Révolutionnaire”, along with a “Union des Groupes Anarchistes de Bruxelles”.

But the founding of the “Belgian Worker’s Party” (BWP) that same year would mark the definitive split between socialists and anarchists. In May 1885, the anarcho-communist newspaper “Ni Dieu Ni Maître”, prohibited in France, relocated to the Belgian capital. That year saw the proliferation of dozens of anarchist journals, in both French (“La Guerre Sociale”) and Dutch (“De Opstand”). Anarchist study circles were created, while proletarian neighbourhoods around the Grand-Place saw the establishment of different meeting places in sympathetic bars, cabarets and libraries. An anarchist group appeared in nearby Molenbeek. The establishment of an anarchist printing press by the Dutch militant Jean-Baptiste Soethout enabled the production of Dutch-language propaganda like “De Revolt”.

The movement’s focus continued to be on attacking reformism and promoting revolution. Tensions kept rising. On the 17th of May 1885, fistfights broke out between local anarchists and a group of Parisian socialists. Ferdinand Monier ridiculed universal suffrage, and called on the hungry workers to go straight for their goals and murder the bourgeoisie. Efforts towards compromise further entrenched the reformist dominance. The constant attempts to undermine socialist mobilisations made the anarchist unpopular. The issues were exacerbated by continuing repression, as the courts targeted the violence-inclined militants.

Social-democrat newspapers called for the deportation of foreign anarchists, encouraging arrest campaigns. The arrest of two young French contributors to “Ni Dieu ni Maître” provoked a protest march with some 200 participants. Local organisers were also persecuted, and several spend multiple months in prison. On the 27th of July 1885, 14 anarchists were arrested, and the foreigners amongst them expelled.

That year, the “Anarchist groups of Brussels”, an entity apparently composed of exiled communards, published a scathing critique of the failures of the Paris Commune, “La Commune de Paris devant les Anarchistes”. They denounced the opportunism of the reformist leaders at the time,

that had failed to react to the threat posed by Versailles, and distracted themselves with elections and legislations, instead of completing the revolution. They estimated that the Parisian proletariat could have crushed Versailles if it had marched on time. Paris should have sent columns of volunteers into the countryside to spread the revolution in every town, village and city, and should have joined forces with the revolutionary communes of Lyon and Marseilles. They denounced the cowardice of the opportunists and the treachery of those in power, who had immobilised the revolution for their personal ambitions. The people could never again let this occur. The people should only be guided by themselves, and never let someone interrupt their spontaneous momentum. The inspirations of the unchained masses would always be more conform to public interest than those of the ambitious and pretentious.

1886 -1894 : A burning black flame

In April 1886, 46 anarchists were identified by the Brussels police at a meeting at the headquarters of the “Groupe Anarchiste Bruxellois”. Monier was arrested in front. Meanwhile, the anarchist bar “À La Mouche” in the Rue des Bouchers hosted the “Cercle La Liberté”, led by Collignon, Reivax, Arthur Govaerts “L’indifferent” and Modeste Winaud. It had at least 146 members, according to the public prosecutor. In 1886, the newspapers “La Torche” and “Le Fer Rouge” openly targeted the rivals of the anarchists. A group of German anarchists is also mentioned as living in the city and keeping contact with Amsterdam’s Bart Van Ommeren, one of the first (anarchist) socialists in the Netherlands to face persecution for his political activities.

On the 21st of March 1886, the anarchists and socialists wanted to celebrate the anniversary of the Paris Commune. But the army was deployed in the streets, the government and judges barricaded themselves in the city hall, and the city guard was armed with live bullets. In Brussels, things stayed calm. A meeting was held in the “Croix de Fer” cabaret. Some twenty participants smoked pipes and talked about petrol bombs, before returning home. On the other side of the city, a little group of armed Italian anarchists gathered in the Bois de la Cambre.

The exiled Errico Malatesta was amongst them. But Brussels failed to erupt, and Malatesta remained quite disconnected from the Belgian anarchists, before his deportation (again) from the country. However, that day, another Belgian city did burn. It was the start of the 1886 Walloon Uprising. In the industrial basin of Liege, the workers looted the shops of the main commercial streets, led by anarchist agitators. The police opened fire and killed 20 of the strikers. Several Brussels and Flemish anarchists had been involved in the actions, and many travelled to the Walloon industrial cities of Verviers, Charleroi and Mons in the next days to participate in the massive riots.

The year 1886 was particularly unstable. There was mass street violence between catholics and liberals in the city centre, a power grab by Leopold II, floods, riots against the royal dynasty, and continuing protests against the bloody repression of the Walloon Uprising. In the catholic press, but also in socialist outlets, French anti-Semitic writings spread. They warned against the “Jewish danger”, depicting jews as infiltrated capitalist exploiters and enemies of the proletariat. With support of the Vatican, they assimilated anarchists, socialists and revolutionaries to judaism and free-mason conspiracies. Thus laying the basis for later fascist propaganda screaming its hatred of “Judeo-Bolshevism”. The catholic vitriol was all the more aggressive as many anarchists

and socialists indeed had Jewish backgrounds or ties to the free-mason lodges, with whom they shared their ideals of enlightenment, rational science and human progress.

In the following months, the anarchists were heavily persecuted. Laws prohibiting their activities were passed. During a huge workers' meeting, on the 27th of March 1886, the anarchist Henri Wismans called for a revolution in the spirit of Liège. But over 6000 soldiers stood ready to act. Still, some 3000 people joined the spontaneous march towards the palace. Around midnight, windows were broken on the Rue Neuve. The police charged with blank swords and cavalry units, dispersing the crowds. The repression only accelerated. When Monier published his "Anarchist Manifesto", the police confiscated 6000 copies, and sent him to prison for three months. Gradually, the damaged Brussels movement lost much of its international contacts.

By 1887, anarchists concentrated on opposing the "Blood Law", a lottery system drafting young men for the military. In 1889, a new paper was founded, the anarcho-communist "Drapeau Noir". It called for a war against capital, but still relied on the idea of a spontaneous, inevitable revolution. Their role was to spread propaganda and prepare efficient action models. The anarchists also founded their own "Maison du Peuple". It was called "La Populaire Anarchiste", situated in the Chapelle neighbourhood. By 1889, new groups became active, like the "Jeunesse Anarchiste", "La Liberté" and "L'Égalité", mainly structured by Henri Wismans, Emile Brassine and Octave Berger.

The Parisian orator Alexandre Tennevin animated an anarchist meeting to protest Belgium's hosting of the French General Boulanger. The same year, Paul Gilles was arrested for distributing anarchist propaganda during a protest march and insulting the royal family as he shouted "Down with the Queen!". Days before, he had been sentenced to 8 days in prison for shouting insults and using a cane against a policeman who tried to arrest a protester carrying the socialist red flag.

In 1891, another Congress of the Socialist International took place in Brussels. The anarchists were deliberately not invited, but showed up anyway, engaging in disruptive protests. The socialists did not know how to react. An Italian anarchist managed to get in and create an interruption on stage. He was arrested the day after, and deported. The anarchists angrily accused the Marxists of ratting him out. The Congress itself kept the Belgians outside and expelled the Spanish anarchists on the second day. Only the Dutchman Domela Nieuwenhuis was allowed to remain, as he tried to promote pacifism. He argued for a general strike in the event of a new war, but his motion was defeated by the Marxist majority. He also clashed with the liberal feminists present at the congress, accusing them of leading a crusade against men. In May 1892, the Florentine anarchist Antonio Agresti was arrested and sent to London.

On the first of May 1893, the Rotterdam anarchist Piet Honing arrived in Brussels North Station with his wife Hannie. He wrote about the city in his memoirs, describing the beauty of its boulevards, the horse-drawn tramways and light vehicles, the endless stores and restaurants. But he found the houses of Brussels ugly, except for the Grand-Place, "the old Flanders in all of its glory". He hated the pale copy of Paris that the city had become. That day, people walked around with red twigs to symbolise the first of May. Around 4 in the afternoon, they heard the Marseillaise play in the distance. On Place Debrouckère, they saw a parade arrive from the Place Rogier, preceded by twenty policemen, a fanfare, and the leaders of the BWP/POB. Red flags and French banners flew along. Honing expressed his amazement at the lack of violence from both sides. Hannie expressed her dismay at the complete absence of revolutionary fervour. Until they saw, at the back of the march, a group of people with a black flag. This black banner, marked

with “Vive l’Anarchie”, was carried by a tall and strong-looking woman, with loose hair and a Phrygian cap, symbol of freedom. Hannie and Piet immediately joined the group. Then, a voice yelled;

“Nous ne voulons!” The entire crowd responded with a fast-paced marching song. It has alternatively been called “Ni Dieu Ni Maître”, “La Chanson de l’Anti-Patriote” or “l’Insurgé”. Here is a transcription of the song, as written in his memoirs, “Herinneringen van een Rotterdams revolutionair”;

“Nous ne voulons ni dieux ni maîtres “We don’t want neither gods nor masters Entravant notre Liberté Curtailing our freedom Mais nous voulons voir apparaître But we want to see appear Le Soleil de l’égalité The Sun of equality Pendant que le peuple sommeille While the People sleep Le tambour vient de retentir The drum has just sounded L’Insurgé qui se réveille The Insurgent waking up Est déjà prêt à partir !” Is already ready to go!”

(Refrain) “Debout! frères de misère! “Stand up! Brothers of misery! Pour nous plus de frontières, For us no more borders Révoltons nous contre les affameurs! Let us revolt against these starvers! Pour égorger les Bourgeoisies, To cut the throat of the Bourgeoisies Et supprimer les Tyrannies And suppress the Tyrannies Il faut du fer, du cœur de l’énergie! There must be steel, heart and energy!” (bis)

“Grâce à la valeur monétaire “Thanks to the monetary value Par ces gens, tu es exploité, You are exploited by these people Lève-toi, Proletaire Stand up, Proletarian Et détruit la propriété!” And destroy the Property!”

“Pour les vampires de la patrie “For the vampires of the motherland Nous sacrifions notre bonheur, We sacrifice our happiness Propagande, cette idolâtrie Propaganda, this worship Ils voudraient pourris notre cœur. They would want our hearts to rot Serrons-nous toujours, les victimes Will we always be the victims Des dirigeants et des coquins. Of the rulers and the malicious. Non! Arrêtons leurs crimes No! Let us stop their crimes Par la mort de ces assassins!” By the death of these assassins!”

Piet Honing had never heard a song like this. It smelled of fire and dynamite. A young anarchist originally from s’Hertogenbosch started talking to them and revealed that the anarchists would split off from the march to join their own headquarters in the Rue de la Colline. Once on the Grand-Place, the anarchists were blocked by a double layer of policemen, and were violently pushed back. Circling back around the Bourse, they finally reached their destination. They drank Faro (a Brussels beer with brown sugar) and the Dutch comrade revealed himself as Karel Van Wal, aka Jozef Van Dijk. They were joined by his equally anarchist wife Adèle Dries, whose thick Brussels Dutch dialect they found incomprehensible. The couple Honing stayed in Brussels for a few months, and Piet was shocked by the alcohol-consumption of the Belgians.

He found that the most active anarchist militants were the Walloon-speakers and foreigners, along with a few sturdy men from Flanders who spent their time at a Flemish bar in the Rue Cantersteen. Those from Brussels didn’t contribute much to the cause. He did meet the anarchist repairer of music instruments Charles Hautstont, a leading figure amongst the cause, born in 1863. This intelligent man helped run the journal “L’Emancipation”, issued every fourteen days. At Hautstont’s house, he got to know the Walloons Labre and Theodor, the German W. Dikmann and the Italian Barosso. They warned him that the bar La Colline was full of infiltrators and spies.

On a Friday night, he joined Hautstont and eight others to go and put up some printed manifesto’s around the city and the suburbs. They called for the soldiers to refuse to shoot the workers during strikes, active sabotage and the refusal of military conscription. Leaving in groups of two

a few hours before midnight, he and Van Wal went to the area between La Monnaie and Bourse. They covered the manifesto's in glue and rolled them into a wet ball, a tactic from Rotterdam to avoid carrying a brush.

Suddenly, as they were gluing a poster in the Rue de l'Escalier, a screaming policeman appeared from an alley called the Impasse Maison Rouge. Using his walking stick, Honing managed to make the policeman trip and fall, but Van Wal ran straight into the hands of another agent. Honing ran and ran until he reached the Rue d'Or, where he knew a bookstore that sold anarchist literature. The owner loved Domela Nieuwenhuis, and through sheer luck, was sitting outside smoking his pipe. Honing ran into the store and ordered him to close the door for the police. The man obeyed, closed the door and kept the lights off until the pursuers passed. He told him to run along towards the Rue du Midi. On the way, he found back his stick, put up a last manifesto, and ran home. Worried, he and Hannie spent the next day in La Cambre forest and took the train to Paris in the evening.

To placate public discontent, 1893 saw the introduction of a generalised male suffrage, but still with unequal amount of votes depending on one's social status. Frustration grew amongst the working class around the government's failure to deliver universal voting rights. This saw the attempt to build a revolutionary front amongst the Dutch-speaking youth. Angered by the strict party discipline promoted by the BWP, "anti-political" socialist dissidents and anarchists from Mechelen, Antwerp, Boom, Willebroek and Leuven participated in three Brussels congresses. But they failed to create the Revolutionary Socialist Party that they envisioned.

On the other hand, the French-speaking anarchists had been unable to push for a revolutionary turn during the repeated strikes for universal suffrage, despite deploying intense propaganda-efforts. These defeats further strangled the Brussels movement. The BWP tore on the wound by releasing a pamphlet warning against the anarchist danger.

In October 1893, the British ambassador protested to the Belgian foreign minister against the deportation to his country of Henry Dupont, a French individualist anarchist, finding the "unlimited deportation to England of the refuse of the continent" intolerable. In 1894, Domela Nieuwenhuis's original volume "Le Socialisme en Danger" was printed in Brussels. That year, Piet Honing came back to the Belgian Capital, and rejoined his local friends. He found work and a house in the Rue de la Putterie, where he was joined by Hannie. Soon they had a baby boy, but he died an infant only a few months later. Honing explained how the insurrectionist bombings in France had set off a general hunt for anarchists everywhere. Arrests were made in the anarchist spaces in Brussels, filled with spies.

1894 : The Université Nouvelle

Throw the anarchists out of the door, and they climb back in through the window. In 1894, the famous anarchist geographer and communard Elysée Reclus was invited for a lecture by the socialist director of the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB). This provoked a strong reaction from the conservative professors, who sought to prohibit the presence of this notorious agitator. Though luck. To support Reclus, thirty professors split away from the university, and the ULB was forced to close. The dissidents aimed to create a new institute, based on the scientific ideals of Auguste Comte and the "Libre examen" (Free examination). Students abandoned the campus and

fought the police along the Mont des Arts. They were supported by a core of young anarchists from Saint-Josse-Ten-Noode.

When Reclus was finally permitted to teach, the new university was founded anyway. It was supported by prominent socialist and liberal politicians, and the local free-masonry. Reclus had given conferences in their lodges, making arguments in favour of revolutionary violence. The “Comité Janson” group was first hosted in a free-mason temple, before settling in the old house of the founder of the ULB. The Université Nouvelle hoped to “re-establish the scientific and social truth” by “expropriating the expropriators, those old men subservient to the interests of the reactionary parties”. But the degrees issued by the university were never recognised by the state, and it always lacked financial means.

A whole group of libertarian thinkers became active within both the anarchist circles and the Brussels free-masonry. Reclus wrote much on feminism, and helped found a league for women’s rights. His anarcho-feminist sister Noémi Reclus oversaw the girls’ education during the Paris Commune, and passed away in Brussels in 1905. The French feminist writer Alexandra David AKA Alexandra Myrial received their support for the publication of her book “Pour La Vie” (For Life). Elysée wrote in the preface; “This is a proud book, written by an even more proud woman”. David wrote feminist articles in the libertarian-leaning newspapers, but never really became involved in the purely anarchist scene. The feminist Angelica Balabanoff received her political education at the Université Nouvelle and the Brussels Maison du Peuple, later becoming a prominent Bolshevik and Left socialist leader in Russia and Italy. Influenced by her early anarchist teachings, she kept a close correspondence with Emma Goldman and spent time with Victor Serge in Vienna.

Another figure that joined the institution was the francophone writer of Flemish origin, Georges Eekhoud. His books described the life of the Flemish dockworkers and the marginalised populations, in Brussels and the countryside. His most famous work was “La Nouvelle Carthage”. Openly homosexual and inspired by anarchism, he used popular language to write on class struggle, social injustice, prostitution and gay relationships. His book “Escal Vigor” was one of the first texts in Belgium presenting an explicitly gay couple in a positive way. Eekhoud also wrote numerous articles for anarchist newspapers and magazines. His anarchism also found echoes in the anti-authoritarian tendencies of major Flemish writers and artists like James Ensor.

The idealist Université Nouvelle notably attempted to resist academic specialisation and utilitarianism. This made it attractive to students from places far beyond the Belgian borders, like Cuba, China, and particularly Eastern Europe. Between 1894 and 1908, 522 Bulgarians, 328 Romanians and 424 Russians attended classes at the Université Nouvelle, outnumbering the Belgians. Hence the nickname “l’Université Bulgare”. Reclus himself kept mostly busy with scientific research and theoretical production, despite his libertarian propaganda in publications like the “Bibliothèque des Temps Nouveaux”. The institution presented another fundamental difference with the traditional Belgian universities. It paid attention to Flemish/Dutch as a respectable language. Across the country, French and Latin had maintained dominance over the academic world. A discriminatory situation that played a big role in the development of later right-wing Flemish nationalism. But in the progressive hallways of Brussels, there were courses of Flemish literary history and Dutch diction as soon as October 1894.

One of the people connecting these largely francophone anarchist academics to the Flemish Avant-garde artists was Jacques Mesnil aka Jacques Dwelshauvers. As an artist, he was attracted by the spectacular “anarchism of the bombs”, yearning for rebellion and individuality. His liberal

upbringing found a natural extension in the individualistic current inspired by Max Stirner. He wrote anarchist texts for the Flemish Avant-Garde periodical “Van Nu en Straks”, which yearned for an internationalist communal art freed of dogma. Countless Belgian artists evolved along these blurred ideological lines, embracing socialist tendencies to oppose the bourgeois order.

In 1895, Mesnil wrote “Le Mouvement Anarchiste”, praised by the Anarchist historian Max Nettiau. Drawing on anarchist ideologues for his proposals of societal organisation, he promoted the quest for moral perfection and active development of the individual conscience as the necessary conditions of change. He rejected the Marxist exclusive focus on the “economic man” and class struggle. More than an ideology, Anarchism was to be the highest synthesis of human freedom, spiritual development and personal consciousness. Mesnil also wrote about love and sexuality, and entered an open marriage with Clara Koetlitz, a friend of the Reclus family in Brussels. By 1901, he would break with Van Nu en Straks, as his novella “Wellust” caused a conflict between the founding members August Vermeylen and Emmanuel de Bom, the former refusing the publication of a text he considered indecent. This conflict illustrated the turn away from their libertarian and anti-bourgeois tendencies by many figures of the Flemish Avant-Garde.

Not everything at the Université Nouvelle was positive. Despite its democratic aspirations, the hierarchical structure was similar to the ULB, far from integrating the students into its governance. The professors remained Eurocentric and racist, espousing ideas of Western racial and civilisational superiority. The First World War brought financial hardship, even if the German occupation (see later chapters) didn’t meddle much in the affairs of the small international institute. The economic situation eventually forced it to re-merge into the ULB. Many were quite content with this outcome, as it marked an end to the confrontation between conservative and progressive (radical) liberalism. But the Université Nouvelle left a real impact on Belgian political society, producing an entire generation of BWP leaders and feminist figures. A small section has lasted until today: the Institut des Hautes Études de Belgique.

1897–1899: Repression

Just like all around the continent, the last years of the Nineteenth century saw a comprehensive campaign of criminalisation and repression of the Brussels anarchist movements. Governments and police forces cooperated on an unprecedented international scale to put down the insurgent militants. Many anarchists went underground and lived highly mobile lives. The promised revolution didn’t materialise. This period marked the further rise of the illegalist and terrorist (Propaganda by the deed) currents within the anarchist international movement.

In Saint-Gilles, regular anarchist meetings were held in a house on the Chaussée de Forest, probably hosted by the travelling merchant Jean-Baptiste Bare. From 1884 to 1897, the Libertarian newspaper “La Société Nouvelle” published some 145 editions. It called for social revolution and was co-written by Eekhoud and the Saint-Gillois Emmanuel Tesch, also a member of the “Groupe Syndicaliste Révolutionnaire”. In 1895, Eekhoud founded his own paper with anarchist and socialist sympathies, “Le Coq Rouge”, along Eugène Demolder and Verhaeren. Emile Chapelier, a self-educated Walloon miner, had emerged in the 1890’s as one of Brussels’ main organisers. He spent time in prison because of his anti-militarism, then again 5 years for forgery. Along with the revolutionary syndicalist Georges Thonar, this new generation was constantly persecuted for its political activity. An anarchist First of May march reached Grand-Place in 1896, with Thonar

carrying the black flag, before being broken up by the police. On the 20th of November 1896, the Italian anarchist Michele Angiolillo reached the Belgian border and soon set out for Brussels. After a year of unemployment, he found a job in a printing atelier owned by the widow of Désiré Brismée. His coworkers published the radical paper “Réforme”, and described Angiolillo as a polite young man that spent his time reading. But the police knew of his previous anarchist activities in Spain and expulsion from France, so kept harassing him, until he left Brussels for London. A year later, the 26 year-old Angiolillo avenged the arrest and torture of 300 revolutionaries in Barcelona by killing the Spanish Prime Minister del Castillo. He was later executed by strangulation.

In 1897, a trio of French anarchists living next to Uccle Station was discovered in possession of an entire set-up to make fake coins. The men were locked away at Saint-Gilles, while Clothilde Adnet was sentenced to 6 years at the Prison des Petits-Carmes. Her devoted sister Jeanne-Marie, also an anarchist, decided to break her out. Discovering that the separation windows at the visitors’ booth were badly attached, the sisters acted on a Sunday morning. As Jeanne-Marie wore a dark cloak and a thick white veil, they took out the separation, swapped clothes and swapped places. Pretending to be her sister, Clothilde broke out in tears and was escorted out. When the guard, back at the cell, took off the hood from Jeanne-Marie, he screamed in surprise at the suddenly different hair colour. Jeanne-Marie laughed loudly in his face. After a long interrogation and a month of imprisonment, she was freed and joined her fugitive sister in Paris. Clothilde sought to escape extradition to Belgium for years, almost committing suicide, but sadly still ended up behind bars.

Repression of anarchists continued. In September 1897, a Dutch newspaper claimed that the German anarchist Gustav Daubenspeck had been arrested in his apartment in the Rue des Riches Claires, suspected of a plot to kill the German Emperor Wilhelm. He had been snitched on by an expatriated compatriot, who had heard of the plans.

In December, the Marseille-born Joseph Degalvès moved to Brussels in search of a job. Arrested in January, he received a “roadmap” that was basically an expulsion order. Despite trying to contest its legality, he was imprisoned in Saint-Gilles for the use of a false name and deported in March. Meanwhile, Louise Michel gave another incendiary speech at the Place Fontainas, which led to her immediate deportation.

In 1898, the German anarchist feminist Fanny Imle AKA Mellita, recently expelled from Belgium for her militancy, published a letter in the Brussels-based “Le Libertaire”. She decried the ostracism of the revolutionaries, sarcastically described the repression carried out by the Belgian authorities, and promised to continue her propagandist activities. The Ixelles-based paper “Lan-archiste” carried on its front page the citation: “God is the son of Ignorance; his godmother is Politics or Hypocrisy, his godfather is Power and Evil.” On the 11th of August, the anarchist Willems was to be arrested in Saint-Josse-ten-Noode. But he fired twice at the police chief Monmaerts and managed to escape. Pursued by the cops and a crowd of people along the Chaussée de Louvain, he unloaded his guns on them twenty-two times. When the police raided his house, two anarchists hiding inside again opened fire. One was shot in the throat, the other arrested.

Paul Sosset AKA Flaustier was also a target during the repressive year of 1898, subjected to a trial for incitement to murder and sentenced to a few months of prison. The twenty-year-old anarchist Charles d’Hooghe received a similar sentence, accompanied by an accusation of incitement to disobey the law.

Meanwhile, Hénault, Thonar and Flaustier founded the anarcho-communist newspaper “Le Réveil des Travailleurs — Organe Libertaire”, reaching 1.200 subscribers until its last publication in 1903. Together with Ernest Girault and Emile Chapelier, Thonar also produced six editions of “L’Effort Éclectique” and twelve editions of “L’Emancipation”. A year later, the anarchist doctor Lucien Hénault took part in a meeting at the cooperative “La Populaire” in support of Alfred Dreyfus. The Dreyfus-affair, a key event in the development of French political antisemitism and its adversaries, was thus also a subject amongst the Brussels militants. The anarchist Dreyfusard Bernard Lazare had even briefly fled to Belgium in 1894, and had published his important “La Vérité sur l’Affaire Dreyfus” in the Belgian capital in 1896.

Meanwhile, a factory based on the ideas of Charles Fourier was built along the canal by the industrialist André Godin. It hosted a “Familistère”, or workers’ town, with a primary school, sanitary facilities and 72 comfortable houses, over which the women held co-ownership and participated in the collective decision and voting processes. One of the buildings is still standing, now part of the Dockx Brussels complex.

A small folkloric anecdote: In the late 19th century, the authorities started building public urinals for men to reduce the pollution of the lower city. The locals declared it proof of Brussels’ libertarian character. Here, you could legally piss against the Church (the urinal of Sainte-Catherine), against Capital (the Bourse building) and against the State. There is still a urinal on the courtyard of the city hall, down a small staircase on the left side. Go try it out!

Epilogue

Brussels is not just the European capital. As you have now seen with the anarchist case, the city has a rich and complex history of resistance and revolutionary movements. This zine is the first of a three-part series. Feel free to look them up on the anarchistlibrary.org or the local archive anarchief.be, print them out and spread them amongst your friends. As you might imagine, Anarchism didn’t disappear from Brussels in 1900. The next two parts of this series will recount the attempted assassinations of the Belgian king and the British and Italian crown princes, the brief rise of a libertarian colony in the Brussels suburbs, the illegalist anarchists that joined the notorious Bande à Bonnot, the reaction of the Brussels movement to the First World War and the enthusiasm of the Russian Revolution, its disappointments, the postwar reconstruction, the establishment of Spanish and Italian anarchist diaspora communities, the rise of pacifism and anti-fascism, the departure of volunteers for the International Brigades, the Resistance against the Nazi occupation, the Internationalist actions against Franco, the actions of the Provo-tariat, the May 68 student uprising, the arrival of the punks and counter-cultures, the Belgian years of lead, the pirate radio’s and the Brussels squatters movement.

You can probably find these next zines through the same way that you found this one. Stay tuned.

Vive la Révolution Sociale. Vive l’Anarchie.

Chronological List of Anarchist Women Active in Brussels

Here is a list of the women active in Brussels documented in this overview, as much research is needed to repair the overrepresentation of men in our historical memory and politics;

- Blondine Snoeck: Communard of West-Flemish origin, accused of complicity in the execution of Versailles' soldiers.
- Pétronille Kindermans: Cook in the Paris commune.
- Angeline Vanden Borre: Communard and Pétroleuse.
- Adèle Lebleu: Communard refugee and Pétroleuse.
- Hubertine Ruwette: Feminist anarchist born in Verviers.
- Hannie Honing: Anarchist from Rotterdam, partner of Piet Honing.
- Adèle Dries: Brussels anarchist, partner of Jozef van Dijk.
- Noémi Reclus: Overseer of girls' education in the Paris Commune, sister of Elysée Reclus.
- Alexandra Myrial (Alexandra David): Brussels feminist writer connected to the Université Nouvelle.
- Angelica Balabanoff: Feminist, early Bolshevik, Left socialist.
- Clara Koetlitz: Friend and helper of the Reclus family, partner of Jacques Mesnil.
- Louise Michel: Communard, pétroleuse and globally famous Anarcha-feminist ideologue.
- Clothilde Adnet: Anarchist counterfeiter, escaped from the Prison des Petits-Carmes.
- Jeanne-Marie Adnet: Equally anarchist sister of Clothilde, responsible for her escape.
- Fanny Imle "Mellita": German anarchist feminist, expelled from Belgium after a letter published in Le Libertaire.

Main Sources

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