

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



Errico Malatesta  
Revolutionary Terror  
Thoughts on a Possibly Near Future  
October 1924

*The Anarchist Revolution: Polemical Articles 1924–1931*, edited  
and introduced by Vernon Richards. Published by Freedom  
Press London 1995.

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)

# Revolutionary Terror

Thoughts on a Possibly Near Future

Errico Malatesta

October 1924

My short article in the last number, 'Against the Excesses of Language,' has provoked some criticism which, over and above the original scope of the argument, raises the general problem of revolutionary tactics. which always need to be discussed, and discussed again, because upon its solution could depend the fate of the revolution to come.

I will not deal here with the way in which the tyranny oppressing the Italian people today can be fought and destroyed. I propose simply to clarify ideas and speak of moral preparation, with either a near or distant future in mind, because it is not possible for us to do anything else. Moreover, when we think the moment for real action has come, we shall have even less opportunity than we do now to discuss it.

I am here concerned exclusively, and hypothetically, with the aftermath of a triumphant insurrection and the violent methods which some would like to adopt by way of 'dispensing justice' and which others believe to be necessary to defend the Revolution against the tricks of the enemy.

Let us leave 'justice' aside. It is too relative a concept; it has always served as a pretext for all manner of oppression and

injustice and has often come to mean no more than vendetta. Hatred and lust for vengeance are irrepressible feelings which are naturally awakened and fuelled by oppression. But if they can be a positive force in shaking off the yoke, they become a negative force when the moment comes to replace oppression, not with a new oppression but with freedom and solidarity. We must therefore strive to awaken higher sentiments, which draw their energy from the love of what is good, while at the same time guarding against a loss of impetus. Let the mass of the people act as passion dictates, if the alternative is a controlling force that puts a brake on it, that would translate into a new tyranny. But let us always remember that, as anarchists, we can neither be avengers nor executioners. If we want to be liberators we must act as such by propaganda and deed.

Let us deal with the most important question, which is also the only serious one to have been raised on this subject by my critics: defence of the revolution.

Many people are still fascinated by the idea of 'terror.' To them it seems that guillotines, firing squads, massacres, deportations and imprisonment ('gallows and the galley,' as a prominent communist recently put it to me) are powerful and indispensable weapons of the revolution, and that if so many revolutions have been defeated or expectations dashed, this has been because of too much kindness, 'weakness' on the part of the revolutionaries, who have not persecuted, repressed or killed enough.

This bias that runs through certain revolutionary groups originated in the rhetoric and historical falsifications of the apologists of the French Revolution, and in recent years has been given fresh life by Bolshevik propaganda. But in fact the opposite is true. Terror has always been the tool of tyranny. In France it served the grim tyranny of Robespierre and paved the way for Napoleon and the subsequent counter-revolution. In Russia it persecuted and killed anarchists and socialists, massacred rebellious workers and peasants and, indeed,

brought a halt to a revolution that stood a real chance of opening up the civilised world to a new era.

Those who believe in the liberatory revolutionary efficiency of repression and ferocity, have the same backward mentality as the *jurists* who believe that meting out severe punishments is the key to avoiding crime and making the world more law abiding.

Terror, like war, awakens brutal, atavistic sentiments, still only thinly veiled by the varnish of civilisation, and it brings the worst elements of the people to the fore. Rather than help to defend the revolution it helps to discredit it, make it hateful to the majority; and after a period of ferocious struggle, leads inevitably to what is nowadays called 'normalisation' — the legalisation and perpetuation of tyranny. Whatever party wins out, it always ends in the establishment of strong government, to some assuring peace at the expense of liberty, to others power without too many dangers.

I am well aware that the terrorist anarchists (the few there are) reject any form of organised terror, government-ordered by hired agents, and that they would like their enemies to be put to death by the mass of the people directly. But this would only make the situation worse. Terror can please the fanatics, but above all it suits the real villains, greedy for blood and money. And there should be no attempt to idealise the masses and imagine them to be composed of simple men and women who, if they commit excesses, do so from good intentions. The police and the fascists serve the bourgeoisie, but come from the bosom of the people!

Fascism has welcomed many criminals into its ranks and has thus, to some extent, purified in advance the ambiance in which the revolution will take place. But there is no need to believe that all the Duminis and the Cesarino Rossis of this world are fascists. There are those who, for whatever reason, do not want or have not been able to become fascists, but who, in the name of 'revolution' are willing to do what the fascists

do in the name of the 'fatherland.' Just as the cutthroats of any and all regimes are ever ready to hire themselves out to new ones, and become their most zealous supporters, so today's fascists will hasten to become tomorrow's anarchists or communists, or whatever, as long as they can tyrannise others and give vent to their own wicked intentions. And if they cannot do so in their own land, because they are known and compromised there, they will bring the revolutionary standard to other lands and will try to rise to prominence by being more violent, more 'energetic' than the others, and by treating as moderates, reactionaries and counter-reactionaries those who see the revolution as a great labour of goodness and love.

Of course, the revolution has to be defended and developed with an inexorable logic; but it must not and cannot be defended with means that contradict its own ends.

The great means for the defence of the revolution remain as ever that of depriving the bourgeoisie of the economic means by which they rule, of arming everyone (until such time as they can be induced to toss their weapons aside as useless and dangerous toys) and of interesting the great mass of the population in victory.

If, to win, we have to set up the gallows in the public square, I would prefer to lose.