

Book Review: “Anarchist Encounters. Russia in Revolution”

“Anarchist Encounters. Russia in Revolution” Emma Goldman, Armando Borghi, Gastón Leval, Ángel Pestaña Núñez, Vilkens. Edited by A.W. Zurbrugg (London: Anarres Editions -Merlin Press, 2017)

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With the occasion of the recent centenary of the Russian Revolution of October, 1917, Anthony Zurbrugg has edited a wonderful contribution to our understanding of those turbulent times. As the revolution turned into a bitter civil war, exacerbated by the blockade of Soviet Russia by the allies of the Entente –mostly France, Britain and the US-, news of what was really going on in Russia were scarce. While the bourgeois press published horror stories, the left-wing movements associated to the Bolshevik movement reproduced propaganda documents which idealised everything Soviet. It was only in 1920 that it became possible for foreigners to visit the Soviet Union, and many unionists and revolutionaries from all over the world did so in order to offer their support and to witness the revolution with their very own eyes. The trip was not easy: often the travellers would be arrested by the countries of the so-called “free world” on their way in or out of the Soviet Union. However the hardships of such a trip, the testimonies left by these visitors give us an invaluable insight into the revolution as it developed, its complexities, hardship, difficulties, achievements and disappointments.

Bringing to life a world in revolution

What we found in this collection of reports put together by Zurbrugg, are testimonies written by anarchists who visited the USSR in the crucial years of 1920–1921, in a period in which still the majority of the anarchist movement supported the Bolsheviks, being oblivious (or in denial) of the suppression of the anarchists which started in 1918 and knowing little or nothing about the Makhnovist movement in the Ukraine. In short, these testimonies constitute a most valuable collection of encounters with the realities of an authoritarian revolution by libertarians. Many of these testimonies are available here for the first time in English, such as those written by Vilkins, Ángel Pestaña, Armando Borghi and Gastón Leval. The lengthy document by Emma Goldman, *The Crushing of the Russian Revolution*, had been published by Freedom Press in London in 1922 and it has been, as far as I am aware, unavailable since. These witnesses, are quite extraordinary figures. The Asturias born Manuel Fernández Alvar, aka Vilkins, to give but one example, went to Russia in 1920 to fight in the Red Army, but growing increasingly critical was arrested between October and November 1920, and then allowed to leave for France. He would die eventually in 1936 fighting fascism in Spain, in the defence of Guadarrama. Informed by these encounters, a critical stance of the international anarchist movement started to develop, as put succinctly by Vilkins: *‘The Russian revolution proves undeniably, against the opinion of reformists, that the capitalist class is not needed at all, that it is a parasite that society can do without. And here we are in agreement with the communists, except that the latter wish to impose a transitional regime which will make them the profiteers of the revolution while we do not expect anything for our own particular benefit and fight for the people themselves to benefit from the revolution’* (p.67).

Let us acknowledge that, like any testimony, these are highly subjective. It is also true that given these testimonies were written in 1920–1921, we miss an important element of the whole picture: they can’t tell us in what ways society actually did change in the period 1917–1920, because none of them was a witness to pre-revolutionary Russia nor to the first years of the revolutionary upheaval -the only Russian in this collection, Goldman, had left Russia in 1885 when she was a teenager. However, this is compensated with a wealth of information they provide about the day to day hardships of ordinary people and their impressions on the political realities of a society in revolution. They bring to life this fateful period with vivid snapshots. These

testimonies are well-informed. All of the contributors spent months and even years in the land of the Soviets. None of them was hostile at first. All of them travelled to support the revolution and evaluate ways to defend it and expand it. Some of them had travelled to the International Congress of Unions of July 1920, as representatives of their own organisations, at a time when the Third International was coming into being. It was after their encounter with the harsh realities of post-revolutionary Russia, that they developed a critical stance. At first, however, most of them yearned intimately to be wrong when confronted with the evidence of the bureaucratic and despotic turn of the revolution. *'How I would have preferred to be mistaken!'*, thought Pestaña, *'How I would have preferred that this could be nothing but the workings of a fevered imagination, driven by the prejudice that might influence me driven by life under capitalism!'* (p.73). It is perhaps the fact that they had come with hopes and expectations what made their clash with reality the bitterer. And yet, in spite of their bitter disappointment, they still made efforts to be as balanced as possible, sometimes bordering on the pathetic, like Vilkens defending the Cheka of the accusations of torture in the international press: *'Yet it is wrong to say that torture is employed by the Cheka. It executes easily, judges without guarantees, commits all sorts of injustices in the name of the proletariat, but as for torture, nothing would be so untrue. Bourgeois spies invent that. The Cheka is odious enough just as it is. It is the White armies that carry out savage mutilations and executions among the communists and the people'* (p.56).

The problem of creating a new society in the shell of the old

The value of these testimonies, above all, is that they are a reminder of the enormous difficulties of changing society, forcing us to put some more thought into general problems which are found in any revolutionary situation. No revolutionaries ever chose the conditions under which they will do the revolution and often they have had to work in exceedingly difficult circumstances of famine, civil war, embargoes, blockade, as the anarchist would find twenty years later in Spain. But the context of revolutionaries influences outcomes in other ways. Inasmuch as most revolutionaries want to also change radically society, there is never a blank slate in which to start putting into practice their social projects: they have soaked in values of the dominant society, they have to build a new world when the structures of the old permeate culture, communities, infrastructure, and institutions of all sorts. In spite of the claim that the Bolshevik revolution stamped out the last vestiges of the Czar's regime, many of the testimonies here point at the continuities between the old regime and the new regime after the revolution. Most of these continuities referred to State structures, but also to political, community and class dynamics – here we find early critiques on how elements of the old regime managed to thrive and reproduce socially their privileged status through the bureaucratic structures of the State, a problem faced not only by radical revolutions, but also by reformist attempts elsewhere. Years later, Charles Bettelheim –who most certainly wasn't an anarchist- would explore in detail this process in his famous *Class Struggles in the USSR* (Monthly Review Press, 1976). To what a degree the Bolsheviks reproduced the dominant ideology of the old regime, and how their ways aped the ways of the autocracy, is reflected here in an anecdotal fashion: following the official fashion of naming everything through acronyms, people in Russian cities derided the *Sov-bourg*, or the Soviet Bourgeoisie, that is, commissars, bureaucrats and technocrats, together with the *Sod-Koms*, or the mistresses of the commissars, many of whom came actually from the old aristocracy (p.36).

The international arena as a straight-jacket

Another big problem which revolutionaries have encountered time and again lies in the international arena, where often they found themselves surrounded by reactionary regimes, such as the Holy Alliance in the 18th century against French Revolution, and the Entente and its criminal blockade of Russia in 1920. These regimes are bent on isolating, invading, strangling, starving and smothering the revolution, thus making it non-viable and avoiding its spread to their own realms. The role of the Western capitalist countries in relation to the Russian tragedies and the famine of the early years of the revolution has been largely white-washed in mainstream historical accounts, in which they single-out the Bolshevik policy as sole responsible of this most dreadful body-count. The testimonies in this book put the record straight. The veteran anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin, in a private conversation with Goldman, in which she asked why he hadn't denounced the arbitrary nature of the Bolshevik rule, confessed that '*so long as Russia was being attacked by the combined imperialists of Europe, and Russian women and children were starved to death by the criminal blockade, he could not join the shrieking chorus of the ex-revolutionists in the cry of "Crucify!"*' (p.139). The Spanish anarcho-syndicalist Pestaña, while acknowledging the many faults of the Bolsheviks, also lashed out against the criminal behaviour of the West in outrage:

'We refuse to hold them responsible for all the evils that afflict the Russian people. In saying so we proceed with the same candour that we used in rejecting and challenging the political procedures and sophistries that the Bolsheviks deployed to seize and remain in power. Yes, they are partly responsible, but for the smallest part, we must add from the off. Material responsibility for all the miseries we witnessed in the seventy days we spent in Russia, falls as an affront, a stigma and a terrible accusation against Europe's governments and bourgeoisie (...) One must absolve the Bolsheviks of this sin. They have enough faults already on their conscience as socialists and as actors in the drama of the dawning of a new world, without also burdening them with ones they did not commit, and sins for which they cannot be held responsible' (p.10–11)

The Kurdish in Rojava have found this same problem –as they have fought to create a new world based on the principles of freedom, autonomy and equality, they have faced a fierce reaction by the most conservative elements of the region, as well as the active military opposition of the Turkish State. But the international arena poses another most subtle problem which has massive repercussions for the organisation of a new and revolutionary society. As no nation can survive on its own in a world interconnected as this in which we live in, the relations to a world still organised in the form of conventional Nation-States poses enormous challenges for revolutionaries. The Kurdish of Rojava, for instance, in order to dialogue with the outside world, had to develop democratic autonomous administrations which mirrors more traditional representative administration, with its parliament, parties and ministers. Although this system has been described as transitional and it runs in parallel to the more direct-democracy oriented council network, it still imposes limitations to the ability of the revolutionaries to change radically their society. These objectives difficulties cannot be overstated and any serious movement aiming at changing society need to factor them in.

The thin-line that divides defence of the revolution from repression

Other immense problem for revolutions is posed by privileged sectors of society, even sectors of the subordinate classes enjoying meagre and very relative privileges: since times immemorial some sectors of the oppressed have been used by those in power to oppose other oppressed. How to proceed, as anarchists, with sectors who, without being part of the dominant classes still want to keep a privileged position in relation to other oppressed groups? Coercion, a fundamental fact in social life, has been always elusive in anarchist thinking, although revolution, as such, is a coercive action by definition –the suppression of some sectors of society, no matter it is made in the name of justice and freedom, is not a sweet affair. An example of this problem is explored in the testimonies of Pestaña, who discusses the situation of the anti-Bolshevik (and presumably anti-revolutionaries) Tula munitions factories' workers, who had staged a strike shortly before he had visited them, which had been crushed with a great deal of ruthlessness by the Bolsheviks. His testimony, though short, is full of insights to feed into broader debates around these issues:

'It should be pointed out –always in the interest of fullest impartiality and so that readers' judgment is not distorted- that the sentences passed on these strikers (...) to us (...) seemed harsh and disproportionate, the strike was unjustified; furthermore at that moment it had counter-revolutionary consequences. Tula munition workers (...) enjoyed benefits and privileges not enjoyed by workers elsewhere. And these privileges were respected by the Soviet Government, inasmuch as was appropriate and possible (...) So (...) being in a superior position as compared to other workers all over Russia, what could justify a call to strike? Moreover, there was another factor that made the circumstances of this strike all even more tragic. (...) Workers decided to declare a strike and stage a conflict in these workshops at the very moment when the whole world was anticipating the threat of a Polish invasion of Russia. Such a strike would leave the Red Army defenceless against the enemy, would it not? (...) the declaration of a strike might have led to an invasion by reactionary armies.' (p.70–71)

This testimony shows how bluntly real life puts to test the lofty theories and good intentions of genuine revolutionaries. No matter how reasonable the argument provided here, one may wonder if the Kronstadt workers and sailors weren't accused in similar terms of potentially aiding even if involuntarily, the reactionary forces. Surely there were important differences –while the Kronstadt sailors and workers were actually defending the revolution and demanding an end to its bureaucratic deviations through a very practical programme elaborated in the original spirit of the Soviet system, the Tula workers seemed bent on gaining particular demands for themselves, placing their own relative privileges above the general needs of the bulk of the oppressed. However the historical verdict on this particular case, it proves that dealing with conflicting interests at a time of deep change, is always difficult and complex. No amount of well-meaning rhetoric can do away with this problem, and no one-size-fit-all solutions exist in order to deal with it either. Again, Vilkins summarises in powerful terms the difficulties faced by actual revolutions in terms of the thin line which divides defence of the revolution from repression, abuse and arbitrariness: *'We do not believe that a revolution must be sweet and united, but what appears as unjustifiable and criminal is that it should be treated as an umbrella for all things'* (p.56).

History at the service of a better future

All in all, this is a highly recommended book which adds to the efforts being done by Anarres-Merlin Press, of making available to an English speaking audience a number of documents of the international anarchist movement which are rarely available in this language. However critical of the centralisation and the dictatorship of the single-party which developed in the USSR, these testimonies, as we have seen, are far from a black and white narrative. The narrative is complex, emotional but nuanced. If there is hurt and bitterness in these pages it is precisely because these are not detached observers. There is a rich texture here, in which the concerns of these militants, all committed to the revolution in their respective countries, comes up to the very forefront. They are just not observing events from a distance as train-spotters. They are thinking of what they can take with them to help them in their own revolutionary activities. They are trying to understand the events in Russia as a way to advance social transformation in their own contexts. It is with these eyes that contemporary activists should approach history in general and this book in particular. Almost a hundred years later, the voices of these anarchists still have a great contribution to make in the endeavour for a better future.

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