

Palestinian Resistance veteran Mark Barnsley on why he joined up

Mark Barnsley

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And they said, oh, are you the the lads that have come to fight in Lebanon? And we said yeah, that's us. And we sat in the back of this Peugeot car and I remember Lero nudging me, and there was a handgun underneath the dashboard and there was a butt of what was a Kalashnikov underneath one of the seats. So I was like, well, this is the real deal isn't it?

Mark Barnsley fought with The Palestinian Resistance between 1978 and 1980

Well, before I started school, me and my sister, who's 18 months younger than me, used to on a Friday, we would go to town with my mum, to meet her mother, our grandma and we'd get dragged around the market for a bit. Then there would come a point where we would go for a cup of tea in Woolworth's caf... I'd sit and gawp out of the window while my mum went and got me and my sister an orange juice...

But, I can remember on this one occasion... watching this old man who went and got himself a meal, but I saw him dusting his food with what he thought was salt. But which I later realised was actually sugar in one of those big pots that you sometimes still see sugar in. And he started to eat this and he realized that you put sugar all over his food and which was obviously not very not very pleasant.

So he went back to the counter and asked them... complained about this... and they just said, well, there's nothing they could do about it.

So he had to return... he's obviously too poor... There's this old man who must have been through the war and everything, he was at the end of his his work in life. And he couldn't just tell them to piss off or tell them to throw it away. He had to come back and sit and eat this, and it was clearly, you could see from his face, it wasn't pleasant, he had to sit and eat this food despite the fact that it was ruined.

And it stuck with me very, very clearly that just sense of wrongness. That sense of injustice that he had to do that, that nobody had any respect for him as... that for what he must have accomplished in his life... that that was it, this whole man of 65 was reduced to eating that.

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I was very political from being a very young child. I can't remember a time when I wasn't political. I can remember being at Infant School and organising protests.

I grew up at a time when I often went to bed hungry. Because there wasn't... because I came from a family of three, my dad had a, he was a machine tool fitter, it was a skilled job, but a badly paid job. And as I say, he was often on strike. So I knew what hunger was. I knew what it was to have holes in my shoes, so I had to wear plastic bags inside of them to keep the water out, you know, and to have to wear old clothes and clothes that were too small for you.

That in itself is a political education and the class divisions in society then were as obvious as they are today. And I think that's true even for a young person, it's obvious that there's unfairness. Or it should be obvious that there's an unfairness between somebody who doesn't have enough, and others who have who have plenty.

You didn't have to look far to see people protesting, rebelling against their betters, their masters. I was just part of that, maybe I had limited understand of it, but as I say you didn't have to

to look very far to see what was happening. The Vietnam War was going on, you had the Cuban Revolution, the anti-fascist struggle in Spain was still going on then, they were still executing anti-fascists.

You had Leilah Khalid hijacking planes and I found this very, very exciting as a child. Our school was cleared because somebody had phoned in a bomb warning from the angry brigade, which meant we all got to go and stand outside for a couple of hours. Which as far as I was concerned, was great.

These were my heroes. The people who were prepared to take on the the ruling class. That's what I would do. It was all very romantic, these these people had long hair and were sort of attractive young people that were saying fuck society. They were my heroes.

* * *

I was in a gang and we were quite a political gang. But we were just a gang of kids, and we were multi-racial, but we would do things like for example we used to do this thing on a Sunday that we used to call 'disturbing the rich' and we would go into a posh area of Sheffield. And we'd take what was later called a Ghetto Blaster, and we would go into these areas where people were washing their cars, all these fucking rich cunts as far as we were concerned. And we would make as much noise we could, we would go and play football on their front lawns, we would get into as much mischief as we could. And then when the the coppers turned up, we'd just run through their gardens and they would never catch any of us because we were kids and we could run like fuck.

But we used to do that. We once bricked a Rolls Royce and it turned out it was the police commissioner's car... I'll not tell you anymore about what happened afterwards but... we would come into contact with the authorities, we would come into contact with the police from the age of about 11.

Mark became aware of Anarchism after reading *Anarchists In The Russian Revolution* by Paul Avrich

I eventually came into contact with Sheffield anarchists who had been producing a magazine... there was magazine in 1891 called the Sheffield Anarchist, and they revived this in 1975 and I think it was 1977 I first came across a copy and quickly got in contact with them.

During that period of the mid 70s, when I was between 14 and 16. Was a time when you got a lot of polarising, you've got the rise of the National Front, and I was very active as an anti-fascist, involving some very militant anti-fascism.

Getting involved in the armed struggle was simple. I was 13 when I threw my first petrol bomb. One of the things that the angry brigade propagated is that everybody could be involved in the armed struggle, you didn't have to be part of an elite commando unit.

At an anti-fascist demo Mark got talking to a slightly older bloke, Lero...

We had similar ideas about armed struggle, again it's one of those things that you know now, you'd think there were only a few nutters who were interested in that kind of thing... If you were involved in the British left of that period, and particularly in the anarchist movement, you would very quickly come in contact with the ideas of armed struggle, these ideas were mainstream at that time.

I remember one time. At a Sham '69 gig, we were talking about the possibility of going to fight in Lebanon for the first time, he was talking about going there. We weren't talking about going out together. We were talking about going independently.

And then in February 1978 the Israelis invaded Lebanon. He decided that he was gonna go to Lebanon then, and he asked me if I wanted to go with him. And I knew... I said I'd think about it, but I knew the answer before I woke up the next morning that I was gonna go then.

The thing was I was 16 and I couldn't get a passport until I was 17. So we had to wait, I was 17 at the end of March, we had to wait until then so I could get a passport. I mean, we're still completely feeling in the dark. We had no idea how we were gonna get to Lebanon or... We talked about various things, Lero had read an article in The Guardian about guns being smuggled from Italy to Lebanon. In actual fact I think that was complete bollox, cause the guns were were being smuggling the other way. We thought maybe if we got down to southern Italy, we could get across that way.

After travelling via London, Paris and Milan they arrived at the PLO offices in Rome...

They took us very seriously and they asked us to write down a bit about ourselves and why we wanted to go to Lebanon to fight, which we did and then they said they would arrange it.

I have to say, I don't think I've ever met a working class pacifist, possibly they exist, but most people who come from a working class background realise that that you have to fight for things. And that the rich, the powerful, are not gonna give things up without a fight.

I'm still the same person I was then, I'm still as I say, I'm still very, very active politically, in a full time sense. I don't carry a gun anymore, but I still consider myself a revolutionary.

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