

Paul Avrich obituary

Historian of anarchism in the US and the Soviet Union

Stuart Christie

10th April 2006

Russian Anarchists (1967) was followed by Kronstadt 1921 (1970) and in 1972, Russian Rebels: 1600–1800. He then moved into American anarchism with The Haymarket Tragedy (1984). This focused on the campaign for the eight-hour day in Chicago in 1886 during which seven policemen were killed by a bomb, and for which four innocent anarchists were executed — one cheated the gallows by killing himself, and another three served sentences until pardoned by the state governor. Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background (1991) established that the two men, executed in 1927 in Massachusetts, were serious revolutionaries rather than “philosophical anarchists”.

Avrich was born in Brooklyn, New York, into a Jewish family originally from Odessa. He graduated from Cornell University in New York State in 1952 and took his PhD from Columbia University in New York City in 1961.

In the early 1960s Avrich had taken advantage of liberalisation in the Soviet Union to research his dissertation on the Russian revolution and the factory committees there. The material he uncovered on the 1921 insurrection at the Russian naval base of Kronstadt — which was suppressed by the Bolsheviks and left more than 10,000 dead or wounded on both sides — was the basis for Kronstadt 1921 and much of his work on anarchists in the Russian revolution.

Back in New York he researched amongst surviving Soviet exiles, many of whom he met at the anarchist Yiddish Freie Arbeiter Stimme (Free Voice of Labour) meetings and established lifelong friendships with many of them.

Avrich’s other work included The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the United States (1980) which dealt with the radical schools inspired by the ideas of the Spanish anarchist educationalist Francisco Ferrer i Guardia, which survived from 1910 to 1960.

His last important work was the extraordinary Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America (1995) based on interviews gathered over 30 years. Avrich was nominated several times for the Pulitzer prize, and in 1984 he won the Philip Taft Labor History award.

He is survived by his wife Ina and his daughters Jane and Karen.

· Paul Avrich, historian, born August 4 1931; died February 17 2006

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