

# **Freedom and dead: Reflections on resistance, repression and sacrifice**

**On the sacrifices of Willem Van Spronsen and Mikhail Zhlobitsky, global  
repression and international anarchist movement**

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*In the recent decades we saw growth of social movements and global uprisings. Revolutionaries and grassroots movements developed tactics, advanced strategically, were succeeding, being crashed by state repressions, were assimilated and reborn again and again. We lost many comrades on the way. Comrades who gave their lives for others – because they wanted to live so much, dying for it became as worth it as living for it and the reign of death was disappearing from their eyes. Let's take a brief look into one aspect of our generation of struggle in places that are far away from the context of so-called Middle East. And two comrades for these places, who gave their lives for it.*

## ***Contemporary global repression***

Years 2018 and 2019 and years beyond were marked by many intense events. Around the world, we could see and participate in some inspiring social movements like the Yellow Vests in France; protests against Bolsonaro in Brasil; resistance against the extradition bill in Hong Kong; fight against democracy and in particular , the Trump presidency in US; The Black Lives Matter movement and building community self-defense and education; revolutionary situations in Sudan and Kashmir, and we can go on.

And of course, many revolutionaries around the world set their sights on Northeast Syria, also known as Rojava – a contradictionary revolutionary project for change of the society, based on a philosophy of decentralized communes, grass roots organizing and confederalism. Using tools of self-critique and critique to challenge hierarchal mentality of the capitalist and patriarchal society, it strives to build values of comradeship, collective mindset and life, militancy, self-defense and women's liberation.

Mainly in Europe and Rojava itself, we could also see the Fight4Afrin and Fight4Rojava campaigns, which brought back the practices of international revolutionary movements and, when fighting against Turkish invasion on the front line and attacking the partners and infrastructure behind the enemy lines, it reminded us all something we already know quite well from international police cooperation – complicity of all states in complex geopolitical setup, and colonialism as something that is so present and physically real to this very day, showing us the consequences of it's past and the present of it's ongoing expansion.

While losing comrades under airstrikes of the Turkish NATO army, and fighting for our living spaces in Europe against police and state authorities who are helping Turkey with military supplies, the connection is easy to feel.

We never eased up the fight. All over, in recent years anarchist and leftist movements around the world faced waves of repressions. Some of the most recent and widely known examples include the Tarnac case in France, an investigation of a "terrorist cell" that started in 2008 and concluded in 2018 with the complete fiasco of the prosecution; Operations Pandora, Piñata, and Pandora 2 in Spain, which began in December 2014 and concluded in 2019; Scripta Manent in Italy, since 2017; Operation Fenix in the Czech Republic, since spring 2015 and continuing till this day; the raids the police have been carrying out across Europe since the battle of Hamburg in summer 2017; the Warsaw Three arson case in Poland, 2016–2017; big repression against the Kurdish liberation movement in Germany; and mass repression in the United States resulting from the occupation of Standing Rock and the resistance to Donald Trump's inauguration, the latter case finally having concluded in July 2018. We are also witnessing ongoing repression in Belarus dictatorship and Russia, most recently with the ongoing "Network" case; as well as

most recent mass arrests and persecution of anarchists in Indonesia; and facing paramilitary massacres of the subversive movements and increasing militarization of policing in different countries around the world.

Being a global phenomena, different repression cases are carried out with the same toolbox, following similar rhetoric and pursuing same goals. There is another trait which comes with all of them, in any place of the world, represented by any state and security apparatus which is backing them up: being only a small piece of what is represented by larger strategy of social warfare, embodied by capitalism; strengthened by history of colonialism of past few hundred years written by the rulers, their armies and professional bureaucrats; supported by the spread of nationalist reaction and division of already so much divided and atomized western civilization; and finally, counter-insurgency tactics, exercised by all armies and paramilitary formations anywhere in the world.

In general, the lessons we learn when repressions strike us, often brings us many criticisms that can teach us. The lesson that is important to learn, is that the existence of the state is a social warfare itself, and through all the repression cases against revolutionary groups and movements worldwide, in reality we are living in a much greater picture of dynamics between the social upheaval and capitalist repression, which is always felt the most on the side of the most marginalized and stigmatized groups, but actually does concern everyone.

Striving to understand how it is, to organize in a revolutionary way – we are also trying to follow our understanding. This way is full of danger and intention of going far on that road means putting our lives on the line in front of capitalism, and it's lethal means of control and suppression.

What do we learn from voices of our comrades who gave their lives in struggle? In recent practice of the worldwide militant anarchist movement, we can see two historically and politically significant events, which created a precedence that we would like to analyze. Two anarchists carried out attacks on essential institutions that represent the division and repression in a current time, knowing that their acts will end with them not seeing the morning of the other day. In current worldwide anti-authoritarian milieu these events were met with admiration, respect, but also with sadness, doubts and heated discussion. Sacrificing one's life for the struggle and people is not something new for militant anarchism from perspective of it's both recent and far away past history, yet the opinions on it are not unambiguous.

## ***“The reasons are clear to you.” Mikhail Zhlobitsky’s attack on Russian Federal Security Service***

The 31<sup>st</sup> of October. It is a freezing cold morning in the streets of the northern Russian city of Arkhangelsk. The city's head office of Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) is open in it's morning hours. Federal security agents got a lot of work – in every department all over the country, they carry the responsibility for maintaining the territorial unity of the Russian Federation and fight against “terrorism”.

In recent months, officers of FSB has been involved in the biggest repression wave against radical left and primarily anarchists in Russia since last 20 years: more than dozens of anarchists are held in prison and tortured, facing life sentences for charges of planning to overthrow Putin's regime, while hundreds of others were detained, tried, tortured, and forced to flee the country.

It is only a fragment of what is population in Russia is subjected to – torture cases are nothing new; especially in recent years, a high number of torture cases became public, showing what has been obvious to everyone, raising popular opinion unfavorably towards commonly crooked police's reputation, which has never ever been clear either.

Historically, ever since the Tsarism, through the Bolshevik regime and new Russian democracy, prisons and torture in particular remains to be the corner stone of foundation of the society and the state organization as well as its protection and economy. Russian Tsars used prisons to let Dekabrist and other threatening political enemies rot in jail and send them thousands of kilometers away to the East, to newly colonized lands of Siberia, away from the center of political authority, which was the centralist monarchist apparatus. It was influential and well rooted, yet fragile against an attack and popular unrest.

After the Russian empire fell, Bolsheviks used prisons to cleanse political opponents *en masse* and access the path to the centralized authority of the State, systematically exterminating social revolutionists, anarchists, nationalists, politically unconforming folk coined as “the enemy of The People”, and especially other communists, including Bolsheviks. Later, they expanded the terminology of “The Enemy of the People” on a colossal layer of the population, not protected by the membership in new privileged and powerful political class of the Party; Bolsheviks created and utilized massive network of labor concentration camps in order to strengthen the political and economical authority. Meanwhile it was hugely influencing societies and communities in the territory of Russian state by prison culture, they put and secured the foundation of the social reality of modern day Russia. This was pre-featured by tragic events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, marked by failures of social revolutions around the world and determined by one of the world's largest prison industrial complexes. Its ideology is deeply rooted in the families, the communities, the blood, languages and minds of people, as well as in all the lands that were colonized by the Russian state, physically changing its shape and picture, creating grim reality behind the barbed wire.

The nowadays Russian state's internal and abroad security structure – the FSB, is directly descending from KGB, the Soviet's State security service. It shows us the continuity of what we can understand as patterns and toolbox of oppression between state socialism and capitalism. Under Tsars and their aristocratic bureaucrats, under Stalin and Putin, under Kennedy or Trump, the machinery of state tyranny remains the same.

So here we are, in front of FSB department. Looking seemingly new, it is in fact almost an ancient bureau. The door opens from the street, and a young fellow enters. In his bag, he carries an improvised explosive device with a detonation button on its top cover. Approaching officers in the hall by the metal detector frame, he draws the hand to the bag, and detonates the bomb.

His name was Mikhail Zhlobitsky, he was an 17-years old anarchist, who decided to pay the highest price to protest humiliation and tortures of his comrades, as well as to take a clear stance on the widespread political repression and surviving in capitalism. He died in the attack, wounding three federal officers and damaging the surrounding office.

We think that acts of individual assassinations of particular authority figures or functionaries are by far not enough to suffice to abolish the institutional, hierarchical power of the state and capitalism as a system, and to build our own power in a liberatory way. However, there are only few options that are left to those who strive to bring about a positive social change. In the face of rise of the global authoritarian reaction, from Brazil to Sudan, from USA to Russia, it is a time for us to seriously think how we can collectively organize in self-defense against the state and

its fascism; with respect to a comrade who took a stand against repression and torture, doing the best he can with the few options left to him, we shall organize in a way that will give people like him a good reason to live for struggle and freedom.

Recent repression against anarchists in Russia should not be taken out of the context and presented as another court case. During only last several decades, before the fall of Soviet Union and after, Russian state followed through colonialist wars in Afghanistan and two counter-insurgency wars against Islamist rebels in Caucasus, started off its own “war on drugs” and imprisoning large amounts of population on weak drug charges, and strengthened weak post-soviet ideology of the state with nationalism and patriotism, formed elite oligarch class of the rich capitalists, and re-positioned itself as a world strongest empire with enormous geopolitical ambitions and colonial strategy.

Ever since the fall of the Iron curtain and from time to time even before that, egalitarian movements and organizations spread all over post-Soviet block, and were in the front of every social struggle, inventing new tactics, set a level of commitment and grass roots organizing. They were learning to survive in capitalism and making bridges with internationalist revolutionary movements. That required a constant struggle to create efficient and resilient organizational structure which would be able to effectively battle the repression and successfully evolve at the same time.

*“This is the test of our fundamental belief in real freedom and our responsibility to each other.”* Willem Van Spronsen in the attack against migrant detention facility

ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) began during the Obama administration, as did many repressive immigration policies that are in the global headlines today, but has intensified and grown immensely under Trump. As ICE takes steps to look more like an unaccountable racist paramilitary force taking out contracts for tens of thousands of M4 rifles, building urban warfare training centers designed to mimic American cities, and gaining the authority to make arrests without warrants. A sense of increasing desperation and helplessness mounts during the campaign to abolish the institution.

Just before dawn, on July 13<sup>th</sup>, Willem Van Spronsen began an attack on the deportation buses outside of an Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention center in Tacoma, Washington. As Willem threw incendiary devices and flares at the buses, aiming to disrupt the transportation of would-be deportees to the nearby Yakima Airport, he no doubt thought of his arrest at that same facility a year prior, taking part in the nationwide movement to occupy ICE facilities across the so called United States.

Willem, like thousands of anarchists who participated in those nationwide occupations, and the various actions against ICE since, felt frustration and anger at the relative ineffectualness of those tactics. Surely, some transportations were delayed, some facilities were temporarily closed – but every week the violence against the Latino communities grows more horrifying, whether from the ever increasing body count of children in concentration camps along the southern border, to the tragedy of family separations, or the aggressive tactics used to make arrests of people without documentation. An agency such as ICE, that grows more militarized with each passing month, which escalates its tactics with each passing day, had to be met with a language that they could understand.

“To my comrades: I regret that I will miss the rest of the revolution.

Thank you for the honor of having me in your midst. Giving me space to be useful, to feel that I was fulfilling my ideals, has been the spiritual pinnacle of my life. Doing what I can to help defend my precious and *wondrous* people is an experience too rich to describe.

My trans comrades have transformed me, solidifying my conviction that we will be guided to a dreamed-of future by those most marginalized among us today. I have dreamed it so clearly that I have no regret for not seeing how it turns out. Thank you for bringing me so far along.”

– *Willem Van Spronsen’s final statement*

Willem, according to some of his close friends and comrades, intended to die in the attack, as did Mikhail Zhlobitsky. Despite this, it is entirely incorrect to dismiss his attack as “suicide by cop”. How could Willem hope to overcome the vast arsenal of the state, let alone the arsenal of the Tacoma Police Department, armed only with home made incendiary devices, and an AR-15? He certainly could not hope to make the attack with support; as his manifesto indicates, he felt that he had to de-affiliate himself with his previous organizations over a disagreement in tactics.

Whenever our comrades, coming from Anarchist collectives that claim to prioritize community and togetherness, feel the need to act individually, and with desperation, we should take pause, and consider why. If we are truly committed to the abolition, by any means necessary, of the white supremacist, settler colonial state like United States, should there not be more attacks like Willem’s? For all of those arming themselves, of preparing the art of self defense, and speaking the rhetoric of, “solidarity means attack”, why are there not more physical disruptions, or attempts thereof, of ICEs efforts? Our collectives must be tight, and full of trust, mutual accountability, and a shared commitment to similar tactics. While we should always maintain a tactical analysis of the cost or benefit to any attack, we should also be asking ourselves – will there ever be a “right” time to act, when our enemy is so powerful? How much more effective could Willem’s action have been if he had two or three more comrades with him? If they had been able to fight, win, escape, and spread their tactics among more of us?

In the USA, there is a dominant mentality amongst many activists, even so called militant anarchists, that attacks such as Willems are impossible to execute because of the level of state repression in America. These statements are made without regard for the tortures that our comrades face in Russia as well as the terrorist charges in Czech Republic, the constant police raids in Denmark, the ongoing repression in France in the wake of the Gillet Jaunes, or a myriad of other examples. These statements, perhaps, are also made from a place of supreme comfort, out of a hope that in the USA, Anarchists will not have to sacrifice in ways that others in less privileged countries have had to. Willem, on some level, knew that such anxieties had to be proven wrong – that all systems of oppression and domination are suitable targets for attack, and that sometimes, in order for others to proceed tactically later on, someone must simply prove that the state is vulnerable to our attacks, anywhere, at any place, at any time.

*“The semi-automatic weapon I used was a cheap, home-built unregistered “ghost” AR-15, it had six magazines. I strongly encourage comrades and incoming comrades to arm themselves. We are now responsible for defending people from the predatory state. Ignore the law in arming yourself if you have the luxury, I did.”*

– *Willem Van Spronsen’s final statement*

Willem, in striking the blow he did, set an example for Anarchists everywhere, but specifically for those in the so called USA. In no place is the state more vulnerable, nor more suitable for attack than in the belly of the beast of capitalism and global oppression. If our movements are to become truly international, we must begin to act with the same bravery and tenacity that Willem did, and make our actions not merely performative, but aimed instead at the material disruption of systems of domination.

“I follow three teachers:

Don Pritts, my spiritual guide. “Love without action is just a word.”

John Brown, my moral guide. “What is needed is action!”

Emma Goldman, my political guide. “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be in your revolution.”

– *Willem Van Spronsen’s final statement*

## **Nights of war, days of transformation. A critique to Anarchist comrades**

We take part in, are inspired by and learn from the movements around the world that organize against patriarchy and the nation-state. For instance, coming to Northeast Syria for most of us was an attempt to learn from the revolution and progress our struggles in other places. When analyzing our movements outside of Rojava, we can see frantic efforts to counter sexism, fascism, control and repression against people of colour, women and LGBTQIA-people, anarchists and leftists, against every person who refuses to conform to a state agenda or who don’t fit the hegemony in society. We are fighting for our lives everywhere.

We have dreams of how we want to live, but our practice is often solely based on reacting to the actions of others. Our movements are mostly not united, but work as single entities relying on the existence of an enemy to serve a purpose. Our aversion to hierarchal structures helps us in maintaining a critical mindset, but can also result in reluctance to organize with formal positions of responsibility and accountability, with a long-term perspective on how to progress to have an impact in the societies where we live and organize. Commitment is lacking within our movements, and there are regular rotations of organized people, of whom most are young, but it’s also fair to say that commitment often gets intercepted by the reality of life in capitalism.

The concept of a militant mindset that is being used in Rojava doesn’t only challenge the individualism in the capitalist society, but the general approach within anarchist groups and movements on how we relate to each other and our collective struggle. If we participate only when and how we want to instead of taking decisions as a collective, and continuing even when times are hard or when we feel like giving up, we cannot build any movement. When we decide to take action it shouldn’t be because we felt that we had no other option and something needed to be done, but as a part of a collective strategy to progress our struggles. We need a solid foundation of structure including tools for personal and collective growth towards a militant mindset.

Critique outside of Rojava is seen as an attack on or disrespect for the individual projects have ceased both because of the inability to find solutions (or conflict resolution) and because of



individual decision making. Here we use the tool of tekmiş and platform in which we from a place of love and care give critique and reflections to help analyze how hierarchical structures, that we've been socialized into, manifests in our behavior towards each other. To understand our present we also need to understand our past, analyze our history to realize how to move forward. When living a collective life every second of every day, fighting, working and organizing together we see how much we rely on each other. We have a responsibility to always strive to find solutions. One of the big challenges is to create spaces in a capitalist society where we don't isolate ourselves or create subcultures, but connect with those around us and give meaning to each other.

Then, it necessarily comes to a point of reflection on a militant personality and commitment to revolutionary organizing. The lack of commitment is a big problem in anarchist movement. We all ask ourselves, how to approach daily life and relations with people in connection to our political beliefs? Is that something that we do at all? And inside of our organizations, how do we balance between the responsibility, individual wishes and desires, so we ensure continuation of some kind of our common line which, on the other hand, is what keeps us all alive and going? How can we develop the understanding that revolutionary organizing isn't a hobby or free time activity, and take it seriously without losing our desires and joy in life? How we can give meaning to such acts like the ones of Mikhail Zhlobitsky and Willem van Spronsen, and multiply its impact, while creating prospect for people to find a meaning of life in struggling for and having responsibility to each other?

And finally, we see a lack of serious political analysis, which is necessary, instead of constantly reacting to the events that are happening around us. This is also needed, but how can we keep up with events happening, meanwhile not letting it drag us away from building our own strength, and figuring out a long-term strategy and understanding our tactics? And especially now, when FSB is in full scale war against anarchists and overseeing all dissent in Russia and beyond, how do we as anarchists understand self-defense beyond the physical/military one? How to not create an elitist cult or perpetuate macho mentality? There is a need of developing a focus with a serious analysis, with a deep understanding of not only actual burning social and economical issues, but also look back to history and see which things worked and which not, and look for deep connections in the present day. That is to say, there is a need of holistic approach to the antiauthoritarian analysis.

In all post-soviet countries (and elsewhere) a connection between widespread patriarchal reaction, "hurray" nationalistic chauvinism and necessity of struggle against prison system can be understood even on the most simple daily basis. You don't need to be a political activist or a sociologist to understand what these things are about, and to know which side of barricade you are on – for instance, any average person in Russia or Belarus can relate to the topic of prison industrial complex or corruption, in one way or another. We need to learn how to relate to each other easily, on more common and fundamental basis, opening ourselves but also standing our ground strongly. On such common points we can meet and together be strong, preparing for the days to come.

*In the memory of comrade Ceren Guneş*

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