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Johann Most and Anarchist Violence

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2012

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Freiheit appear featuring a fifty-year old article by Karl Heinzen on tyrannicide; an article he had planned to reprint long before the shooting of the President.⁵⁶ This unfortunate coincidence led again to a conviction and prison. All of Most's "speech" trials and convictions are hard to square with the First Amendment, and perhaps also with a long, western tradition. Heiner Becker wonders in this context if Most would have been spared prison if he had published instead an excerpt from Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* in which revolution is an obligation and safeguard against tyranny. It can be argued that the United States practiced "tyrannicide" against Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein, Bin Laden, or aided it against Gadhafi?

In conclusion, there is no question that the majority of immigrant anarchists in the United States did not adhere to propaganda by deed, consistently condemned violent methods, and often criticized Most. Who better to attest to this than Robert Pinkerton himself, who in the wake of the 1901 McKinley assassination wrote an article on surveillance of anarchists in which he stated that "the great majority of the anarchists in this country and abroad are a sufficiently harmless body of men and women. They have what they consider advanced ideas on government, or lack of government, but are unalterably opposed to all forms of murder and violence. They realize that such an event as the assassination of President McKinley or of the King of Italy does more harm to their propaganda than anything else that can happen."⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Heinzen, "Mord contra Mord," *Freiheit*, September 7, 1901.

⁵⁷ Robert A. Pinkerton, "Detective Surveillance of Anarchists." In: *North American Review*, Vol. 173, No. 540 (November 1901): 612.

All this caution and refinement came just at the time when younger, outspoken activists entered the movement some apprenticed by the older Most—Alexander Berkman came in February 1888, Emma Goldman in August 1889. While the younger comrades demanded direct action against the robber barons, Most appealed for calm and realism. When Berkman shot industrialist Henry Clay Frick for his handling of the Homestead strike in July 1892, Most condemned the deed arguing that such actions do not work in America; it would not bring a propaganda value.⁵³ “If it did, let’s go ahead. Let’s shoot down the first best Monopolist [...] In a country where we are so weakly represented and so little understood [...] we cannot afford the luxury of attentats. [...] In countries like America, where we still need solid ground to stand on, we must limit ourselves to literary and verbal agitation.”⁵⁴ So Most did not condemn the deed as such, only the effect on the anarchist movement. His advice to anarchists: be a “tyrant hater” but be self-critical.⁵⁵

A final episode in Most’s evolving relationship with political violence comes in the wake of the assassination of President McKinley on September 6, 1901. The next day, Most inadvertently had

⁵³ According to a police report, the Austrian vice-consul in New York had sent a telegram to the Pittsburgh police in 1892 to warn them that a conspiracy to kill Henry Clay Frick was afoot, and that if Berkman should fail, another anarchist named Aronstam would make a second attempt. Aronstam was Modest “Fedya” Stein, a close friend of Berkman and Goldman, who did indeed travel to Pittsburgh with dynamite in his pockets after Berkman failed to kill Frick. The press already knew about the second man (possibly tipped off by the police) because as soon as Stein got off the train he caught a headline “Aronstam Here to Kill Frick” so he dumped his explosives and left Pittsburgh on the next train. See Hoerder, ed. *Plutokraten und Sozialisten*, 371; Paul Avrich. *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America*. Abridged edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 41.

⁵⁴ Most. “Attentats-Reflexionen.” *Freiheit*, August 27, 1892.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* As is well known, Emma Goldman, who was a close friend of Berkman and helped him procure a gun, was furious with Most and horsewhipped him on stage during a public meeting.

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deed has by no means become for us an exclusive hobby-horse that we ride constantly and forget all other propaganda. We work by the printed word wherever and whenever we can.”⁴⁹

In 1889, Most ironically lamented that the prevailing image of anarchism is that of a knife-wielding bombthrower, an image he himself helped create!⁵⁰ He now sought to dispel this caricature because that image was interfering with the all-important task of spreading the philosophy of anarchism. Still, Most warned that the oppressors won’t yield without a fight, and that anarchists and workers must at least be prepared for battle: “[Anarchists] are not bloodhounds who lustfully commit murder and arson in order to speak about revolution, instead they pursue revolutionary propaganda because they know that a privileged class has never been overthrown through peaceful means, and because they [anarchists] are convinced that the Bourgeoisie can be swept away by violent means.”⁵¹

So Most did not renounced entirely forceful resistance, but he set out to refine his position. “There is no greater error,” he states in 1892, “than to believe that we, as anarchists, need only to commit *any* deed, no matter *when*, *where* and against *whom*. To have a propaganda effect, every deed needs to be *popular*; it must meet with approval by an important part of the proletariat. If that is not the case, or if it actually meets with *disapproval* of the very part of the population it is intended to inspire...anarchism makes itself unpopular and hated. Instead of winning new adherents, many will withdraw.”⁵²

⁴⁹ [Most.] “Die Stellung der Anarchisten gegenüber anderen Arbeiterparteien,” *Freiheit*, November 30, 1889.

⁵⁰ Most. *Der kommunistische Anarchismus* (New York: John Müller, December 1889; Frankfurt a.M.: Verlag Edition AV, 2000), 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵² *Freiheit*, 14: 17 (April 23, 1892). Translated by Heiner Becker in his “Johann Most.” In: *Haymarket Scrapbook*, edited by David Roediger and Franklin Rosemont (Chicago: C.H. Kerr, 1986), 139.

to anarchism, but rather that everything must take shape *immediately* with inconsiderate violence in favor of our principles, so that the entire struggle would not have been in vain.”⁴⁵ Instead of individual deeds he now proposed a sort of Jacobin struggle: “Confiscation of all capital by the soldiers of Revolution who act as a kind of world conquerors, and the immediate extermination of the Bourgeoisie, Aristocracy, and Clergy—this or nothing should be the solution.”⁴⁶

Most’s pet issue became the arming of workers in preparation for social revolution. The idea of a people’s militia as opposed to a standing army had been espoused by Most since his socialist days, but now it reflected his preoccupation with America rather than European affairs. “Probably the best thing,” he wrote in 1885, “would be that all organized workers of the civilized world could be moved to acquire good rifles [...] and a good amount of munitions, to train militarily and so formally mobilize themselves for the coming social war.”⁴⁷ Most never tired of pointing out that the U.S. had a second amendment, and that he was merely speaking in the tradition of Washington and Paine. Not everyone agreed with that analogy.

By 1888, Most had embraced communist-anarchism and spent more time on constructive ideas about an anarchist society than focusing on rifles and drills. Individual terrorist actions were immature, ineffective, and almost cultish. He refused to republish his explosives manual despite requests.⁴⁸ In November 1889, he even fancied a genuine rapprochement between socialists and anarchists. Anarchists, Most felt, should refocus on propaganda through print and oratory and reject the proposition that “any act of violence against some representative or guardian of the ruling classes” would invariably have a positive effect. “Propaganda by

⁴⁵ Most. *Die Anarchie* (New York: John Müller, January 1888), 12-13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁷ Most. *Revolutionäre Kriegswissenschaft*, 50.

⁴⁸ Becker “Johann Most,” 56.

Framework

In this paper I discuss Johann Most’s evolving views on anarchist violence during the time of his expulsion from Germany in 1878 to his death in 1906. For fifteen years, Most was a Social-Democrat who became a radical socialist in 1880 and an anarchist after 1883 until his death. This was a gradual transition and his views on violence changed along with it. I let Most speak for himself by quoting from pamphlets, editorials, and personal letters. Resistance and insurrection was a favorite topic of his and should, I believe, be viewed in the wider context of the monopoly of violence by the state, the prevalence of “ordinary” crime, the advocacy of violence against strikers by the mainstream press, and the employment of private armed thugs and vigilantes by employers.¹

Peaceful Revolution

During the 1870s, Johann Most was a moderate Social-Democrat who got himself elected twice to the German Reichstag. He opposed any violent means to accomplish the revolution. In 1878, two men, Max Hödel and Karl Nobiling, attempted two separate assaults on the life of the Kaiser.² Most condemned both,

¹ During the Great Railroad strike of 1877 the *Chicago Times* called for the use of hand grenades against strikers. Employers organized, sponsored, or funded a number of armed vigilante groups like Boys in Blue, the Ellsworth Zouaves or the official-sounding Law and Order League. Deputized, armed men roamed the streets to harass or beat up workers. See: Paul Avrich. *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 33.

² Rudolf Rocker says the Nobiling had no connection to the socialists. See: Rocker. *Johann Most: Das Leben eines Rebellen* (Berlin: “Der Syndikalist”, 1924; Glashütten im Taunus: Detlov Auvermann, 1973), 60. Hödel, who had been expelled from the Party a few days before his deed, had some connection with anarchist August Reinsdorf. In fact, Most himself wrote that Hödel was a student of Reinsdorf. See: John Most. *Memoiren. Erlebtes, Erforschtes und Erdachtes* (New York, 1903-7), III, 72.

and called one perpetrator “an idiot.”³ His friend Andreas Scheu criticized Most for abusing the terrorists and blamed it on the fact that Most had been in Parliament too long.⁴

Bismarck used the shootings to pressure Parliament to pass a sweeping Anti-Socialist Law on October 19, 1878, prohibiting all socialist activities, but allowing sitting socialist MPs to keep their seats. At the time, Most had been in prison for insulting the Kaiser, and upon his release was expelled from Berlin as stipulated in the new law. Most refused to lay low and went into exile to London where he became editor of a new independent socialist paper, *Freiheit*, to be illegally shipped to and distributed in Germany (with the help of Hamburg dockworkers).⁵ But socialist leaders in Germany did not approve of Most’s rogue action as many thought it wiser to lay low for the duration of the Red Scare. The exiles disagreed and began embracing different means to combat the crackdown.

In London, Most also abandoned hope for legal reforms and instead focused on smuggling *Freiheit* into Germany. “It made me happy,” one friend writes in 1879, “to see that Most distances himself from the legal, parliamentary politics in order to go the way of Revolution.”⁶ Of course, Most never regarded revolution and politics as polar opposites; shunning the legislature did not mean an acceptance of violence. “Thus Socialists are revolutionary in so far that they strive for a total reorganization of state and society,” Most writes in 1879, “but they are not conspirators. They undermine the

³ *Berliner Freie Presse*, May 28, 1878 & May 29, 1878. Quoted in Heiner Becker, “Johann Most.” In: *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*. Vol. 41, no. 1-2, (Mar 2005): 34.

⁴ Becker “Johann Most,” 42.

⁵ Dirk Hoerder, ed. *Plutokraten und Sozialisten: Berichte deutscher Diplomaten und Agenten über die amerikanische Arbeiterbewegung, 1878-1917* (München, New York, London: K.G. Saur, 1981), 105.

⁶ Edouard Vaillant to Andreas Scheu, June 14, 1879. (Teil-)Nachlaß Scheu, Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, Amsterdam (hereafter IISG). Quoted in Becker “Johann Most,” 43. Translation from French to German by Heiner Becker.

but instead provoke the group to commit illegal actions.⁴² When Most arrived in New York in December 1882, the one German agent (codename “Don Fernando”) was immediately instructed to keep an eye on him.⁴¹ The ambassador in Washington also contacted the Pinkerton agency—a man named Georg Hottschin was being vetted for spy duty—but nothing came of it, largely for budgetary reasons.⁴² Only in 1884 did the old German agent gain membership in Most’s Group I, but again failed to obtain crucial information because the anarchists were too cautious about sharing anything. After 1889 there seem to have been no agents in German employ active in New York, but beginning in 1901, two Pinkerton detectives were active there until 1917.⁴³

Workers, To Arms!

The shock of the Haymarket trial (1886-7), esp. the verdict with death sentences, changed Most’s views on individual revolutionary action, and made him reject indiscriminate violence.⁴⁴ Lone wolf attacks were futile and counterproductive, collective action was more promising. Armed struggle by workers was not only legitimate, he felt, but necessary, even if it means bloodshed.

Two months after the Haymarket executions of November 11, 1887, Most angrily preached armed social revolution (Jan 1888). “[...] It is perfectly clear that the social revolution cannot take place as a *slow* transformation from capitalism to communism

⁴¹ *Acta des Königlichen Polizei-Präsidii zu Berlin betreffend den Redakteur Johann Most. 1881-85*. p. 153. Landesarchiv Berlin.

⁴² Hoerder, ed. *Plutokraten und Sozialisten*, 368-9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 366.

⁴⁴ The prosecution attempted to have Most handed over by New York authorities but to no avail. He briefly feared he would be indicted as instigator and perhaps charged with murder. This intention had been communicated by the prosecution to the German consulate in Chicago. See Hoerder, ed. *Plutokraten und Sozialisten*, 150.

human [...] They are monsters to be exterminated.”³⁷ Soon, Most believed, the United States itself would turn into a tyranny and the American proletariat would therefore also turn to terrorism soon. “What America is concerned, one day the people will similarly learn to understand that playing around with ballot boxes will need to come to an end, and that it would be better to hang fellows like Vanderbilt, Jay Gould, etc. from the nearest lamp post.”³⁸

Spying on Most

After passage of the Anti-Socialist law, the German police immediately expanded its network of spies to be sent abroad to places like Paris, Budapest, Brussels, Geneva, and London—some 148 officers and agents in all.³⁹ In January 1879, Berlin police chief von Madai contacted Scotland Yard’s Howard Vincent, director of the criminal division, to request a permanent surveillance of Most, which Vincent struggled to accomplish. Still, by the end of 1881, Berlin had two agents in London who had gained access to *Freiheit*’s editorial room and even managed to befriend Most himself or at least had conversations with him.³⁹

In 1881, Berlin also hired one agent to operate in New York, who, as it turned out, failed to deliver satisfactory information (he would be dismissed in 1889).⁴⁰ German authorities also made contacts with the private Pinkerton Detective Agency and expressed an interest in agent Ernest Stark who offered to infiltrate anarchist groups and uncover possible assassination attempts for \$2000 to \$3000 a year. He also stated that he would not be a passive member,

³⁷ [Most.] “Zur Propaganda der That.” *Freiheit*, February 16, 1884.

³⁸ Ibid. Most elsewhere condemns the lynching of blacks and uses it as an illustration of how violent ordinary Americans really are.

³⁹ Ibid., xxxii, 105. There are some spy reports that clearly show they talked with Most. See: *Acta des Königlichen Polizei-Präsidii zu Berlin* [A. Br; Pr. 030], Landesarchiv Berlin.

⁴⁰ Hoerder, ed. *Plutokraten und Sozialisten*, 366.

existing order not secretly, but openly and expound their principles in the clear light of day. And when it comes to it, their struggle will be fought not with physical violence but on intellectual grounds. They’re not set on punching, but rather on revolutionizing the minds.”⁷

Radical Socialist

Most’s mission of “revolutionizing the minds” depended on the successful distribution of ideas through newspapers and public speaking, something he himself excelled at. But since 1878 none of this was legal in Germany. This situation created a willingness on the part of Most—editor of the most important German-language socialist paper—to hear arguments for shifting tactics to combat the system, esp. since the state seemed to hold all the cards.

As is well known, a number of individuals influenced Most while in London: Russian militants raving about their fight against the czar, the Belgian revolutionary Victor Dave who gives him a taste of Bakunin and becomes a close friend. Most was also influenced by August Reinsdorf whom he met in 1876 when Reinsdorf blasted Social-Democrats (like Most) as nothing more than a “ballot and newspaper party.” Most remembers in 1885 that “we were then not on the same page regarding these matters, though I must confess that Reinsdorf’s words made a powerful impression on me.”⁸ The two men met again in Switzerland in 1880 where Reinsdorf bluntly told Most he was willing to kill Berlin police commissioner Guido von Madai (nothing came of it).⁹ Reinsdorf furthermore advised German workers to act for themselves: “Each

⁷ Johann Most, “Revolutions-Angstmichel,” *Freiheit* (London), February 8, 1879. Quoted in Becker, “Johann Most.” In: *Haymarket Scrapbook*, edited by David Roediger and Franklin Rosemont (Chicago: C.H. Kerr, 1986), 249.

⁸ Johann Most. *August Reinsdorf und die Propaganda der Tat* (New York: Selbstverlag, 1885; Frankfurt a.M.: Verlag Edition AV, 2002), Vol. I, 32.

⁹ Ibid., I, 52.

independent group should have the right to use poison, a dagger or dynamite as a means for emancipation in their own locality.”¹⁰ For a while, Most was a devotee of Auguste Blanqui, the French communard and proponent of the idea that revolution must be launched by a small, conspiratorial vanguard. Most’s expulsion from the socialist party in August 1880 radicalized him even further, although an anarchist he was certainly not.

By March 1881, Most no longer harbored qualms about the use of violence to bring about social revolution, at least rhetorically. When news of the assassination of Czar Alexander II reached Britain, Most readied the new issue of *Freiheit* with his front-page article titled “At Last” in which he glorified the bombing and described in detail the last hours of the monarch’s life until “at last he died like a dog.”¹¹ The appearance of the article led to his arrest and imprisonment. He was released in October 1882, and then traveled to the United States for a lecture tour moving *Freiheit* to New York in order to continue propaganda in Europe.

By the second half of 1883, Most embraced a crude anarchism with several morsels of Jacobinism and Blanquism thrown in. He never intended to stay in New York but for the time being fixated on propaganda for the coming revolution in Germany. With every passing month, however, Most grew increasingly disillusioned about the prospect of returning to a free Germany.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., I, 61.

¹¹ *The London Times*, April 1, 1881. The original phrase reads: *Endlich krepierete er*. “Krepieren” is equivalent to the American slang “croak” and after some difficulty was translated into the court records as “At last he died like a dog.”

¹² At the SLP convention in Baltimore in December 1883, Most was formally expelled. Socialists pledged to oppose any violent means and instead renewed its commitment to the ballot box. It was the definitive split between socialists and anarchists in the United States. See: Hoerder, ed. *Plutokraten und Sozialisten*, 65.

right thing, but he expressed the wish to soon speak with me alone, from which I concluded he’ll be forthcoming.”³¹ I find the evidence for the Richetsky-Most connection incomplete at best.

Another incident occurred in New York in March 1886 when two men were arrested in the dead of night concealing a small arsenal of weapons including a firearm, a club, and tubes filled with fulminating mercury. One of them had a letter addressed to Most assuring him that “I am at all times ready to act for our cause, even to the knife.” They were both convicted and imprisoned.³² As historian Messer-Kruse cautions, these men were not merely boasting; one of them attacked the officer and was later charged with assault and battery.³³ Most firmly believed that against a terror regime we must apply even more terror. It is a “holy cause of the peoples of the world.”³⁴ When two Austrian anarchists (Hermann Stellmacher and Anton Kammerer)³⁵ were caught and tried for several murders and robberies of police officers, an 1884 meeting of New York anarchists, including Most, praised the “glorious deeds of the Terrorists and Anarchists of Vienna,” because it was retaliation for Austria’s anti-radical law.³⁶ Most not only justified the murder of police officers, but refused to call it murder. “Murder is the killing of a human,” he clarified, “but I have never heard that a policeman is a

³¹ Johann Most to Victor Dave, New York, 15 November 1884. IISG.

³² *New York Times*, March 10 and 11, 1886; *New York Sun*, April 10, 1886. See also Messer-Kruse. *The Haymarket Conspiracy*, 123.

³³ *New York Sun*, April 15, 1886.

³⁴ [Most.] “Zur Propaganda der That.” *Freiheit*, February 16, 1884.

³⁵ Ibid. Above the masthead of this edition of *Freiheit* it reads: “Against Tyrants All Means Are Justified.”

³⁶ Kammerer murdered Vienna police chief Hlubek in 1883 and was involved in the robbery-murder of banker Heinrich Eisert (1884). Days later another police officer Ferdinand Blöch was shot (1884). Historian Herbert Steiner suggests that one or both of these criminals initially worked for the police. See Steiner. *Die Arbeiterbewegung Österreichs 1867-1889. Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte von der Gründung des Wiener Arbeiterbildungsvereines bis zum Einigungsparteitag in Hainfeld*. (Wien: Europa Verlag, 1964), 224-225.

been conducted by some New York anarchist groups—one had a weapons committee—going back to 1882 if not earlier.²⁸

For all the talk, there is no evidence that Most ever committed a violent crime, but there are indications that he aided others who did. His letters reveal him providing funds to willing men to commit a propaganda deed and even arranged an escape to the United States. On one occasion, Most in October 1884 describes a mission for an unnamed activist to go into Germany to “go take care of things” (*um dort Allerlei zu besorgen*). Most also sends \$40 to pay for a possible companion for the mission.²⁹ This may allude to a delivery of explosives, or simply describes a mission to retrieve subscription monies, although the context of letters written before and after makes the latter case less likely.

There was one terrorist act in which Most played the role of bankroller, at least according to historian Heiner Becker. On October 29, 1883, well before Most had access to the dynamite factory, Josef Richetsky attacked the Frankfurt police headquarters with a small bomb causing minimal damage (no one was hurt). Richetsky escaped and arrived in New York under the alias “Jäger” more than a year after his deed (Nov 1884).³⁰ Most clearly knew about him as he informs his friend Dave that “Jäger arrived the day before yesterday and right away told me a great deal, though not yet the

²⁸ A. Sartorius von Waltershausen, *Der moderne Socialismus in den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika* (Berlin: Bahr, 1890), 176. See also Messer-Kruse. *The Haymarket Conspiracy*, 116-117. According to a German police agent, the central committee of the Social Revolutionary Club ordered two comrades to conduct tests to see how such material might be applied. See: Hoeder, ed. *Plutokraten und Sozialisten*, 98.

²⁹ Johann Most to Victor Dave, New York, 28 October 1884. IISG. Most send \$40 for an unnamed person’s “activity” (*Tätigkeit*). The money was designated in case the propagandist should need a companion for his mission to go into Germany. It is interesting to speculate whether or not the money came from proceeds of the insurance fraud committed by some of Most’s associates.

³⁰ Volker Eichler. *Sozialistische Arbeiterbewegung in Frankfurt am Main* (Frankfurt am Main: W. Kramer, 1983), 110, note 144. Eichler identifies Jäger as Richetzky.

Propaganda by the Deed

By 1884, Most supports propaganda by the deed, a tactic adopted by some anarchists since 1881 who believed that an individual deed could do as much or more for propaganda than words on a page. Initially, such a deed needn’t be violent, but the definition quickly narrowed to mean any violent act or attempt of such an act (*attentat*) against a representative of the State. Most seconded this idea esp. against the German regime.¹³ The Anti-Socialist law was for Most a “dividing line” between rulers and the ruled, and this opened up the possibility for true revolutionary action such as Reinsdorf’s failed dynamite plot to blow up a German imperial monument in 1883. Most thus viewed Reinsdorf as a hero and martyr (he was executed).¹⁴

From his perch in faraway New York, Most believed he could do his part in nudging along revolution in Germany. He published instructions for the manufacture and use of explosives. In the fall of 1884 he secretly moved, under a false name, to New Jersey to work in an explosives factory.¹⁵ “I can obtain from this factory ready-made materials and in considerable quantities,” he assured his friend.¹⁶ As for transportation, “it seems to me that England and Germany are not the kind of places to unload such things. Perhaps

¹³ In a letter to his friend Victor Dave, Most sees America as a young country someday ready for revolution, but regards Europe as being in the vanguard. Johann Most to Victor Dave, New York, 10 August 1884. Most und Neve. *Briefe deutscher Anarchisten 1884-1887*. Aus Victor Dave’s Nachlass. Herausgegeben von Max Nettlau, 12 October 1925. IISG.

¹⁴ Most. *August Reinsdorf*, I, 45.

¹⁵ Johann Most to Victor Dave, New York, 8 July 1884. Most und Neve. *Briefe deutscher Anarchisten 1884-1887*. Aus Victor Dave’s Nachlass. Herausgegeben von Max Nettlau, 12 October 1925. IISG.

¹⁶ Johann Most to Victor Dave, New York, 19 September 1884. IISG. Most also mentions that he could count on the help of a comrade who was employed there as foreman.

Holland or Belgium?”¹⁷ A month later, Most shipped a “large ration of poison” (blue acid) to Europe and reported that he is building his own “arsenal” of explosives.¹⁸ In a remarkable passage, Most clarified that “one man can easily carry out 5-6 deeds in as many locations without getting into danger if he follows good instructions and operates with caution and prudence.”¹⁹

At the same time Most was purloining explosives, a slew of tenement fires involving anarchists made the news. As it turns out, several associates of Most set fire to their dwellings in order to collect insurance payments to be used for the cause.²⁰ This scheme worked well until early 1885, when one fire killed a mother and two children. Most never directly participated but refused to condemn the perpetrators, a decision that cost him several friendships. One of the firebugs, John Panzenbeck, for example, had Most’s “full confidence.”²¹ Reports from the undercover police agent in New York also talk about a criminal gang which included some anarchist, but it also stressed that the authorities would do everything they could to make the anarchists as a group responsible.²²

¹⁷ Ibid. Most mentions the use of bamboo-canes for shipping explosives, which had once been used to ship copies of *Freiheit* from England to the continent.

¹⁸ Johann Most to Victor Dave, New York, 2 October 1884. IISG.

¹⁹ Ibid. Most adds that he has sent encouraging words to a man possibly named Conrad (hard to read in Most’s hand).

²⁰ The story broke when the individualist anarchist paper *Liberty*, published “The Beast of Communism” on March 27, 1886, specifically linking named individuals to Most’s anarchist group. This did not stop the arsonists. On May 3, 1886, the New York Sun published a follow-up with even more details, followed by “The Facts Coming to Light” in *Liberty* on May 22, 1886.

²¹ Johann Most to Victor Dave, New York, 4 December 1884. IISG.

²² Hoerder, ed. *Plutokraten und Sozialisten*, 370. Hoerder mentions the year 1887 for the reports on the arsonists, but most cases, including the Kohout case, occurred between 1883 and 1886. An agent’s report from a week after the Haymarket executions has one witness of the prosecution claim that the real bombthrower was a member of the arsonists’ gang.

It is unclear if the arsonists were inspired by Most’s infamous manual on explosives, *Science of Revolutionary Warfare*, which in fact does not give instructions for insurance fraud by arson and wasn’t published until July 1885.²³ “Not much more needs to be said today,” Most wrote, “about the significance of modern explosives for the social revolution of the present and the future [...] Nothing is therefore more natural than that revolutionaries of all countries strive more and more to obtain them and learn the art of applying them practically.”²⁴ Just as dynamite is used in mining by placing explosives in bore holes, so too can revolutionaries blow up “palaces, churches, barracks, courthouses” with great effect.²⁵ There is no question that the manual, which carried the subtitle “A Handbook of Instructions for the Use and Manufacture of Nitroglycerine, Dynamite, Gun Cotton, Fulminating Mercury, Bombs, Arson, Poisons, etc.” inspired activists to at least plan serious mischief. During an 1885 police raid of a San Francisco apartment, dynamite, wires, fuses, and blasting caps were found along with Most’s manual.²⁶ Most himself (with four others) experimented with explosives in the form of controlled tests, such as the one with an electric battery against metal and stone. “The scrap blew sky high,” he boasted to a friend, “if August [Reinsdorf] had a device like this—O, it would’ve been brilliant!”²⁷ Tests like these had

²³ Max Nomad. “The Preacher: Johann Most, Terrorist of the Word,” In: *Apostles of Revolution* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939), 286.

²⁴ Johann Most. *Revolutionäre Kriegswissenschaft: ein Handbüchlein zur Anleitung betreffend Gebrauches und Herstellung von Nitroglycerin, Dynamit, Schiessbaumwolle, Knallquecksilber, Bomben, Brandsätzen, Giften u.s.w., u.s.w.* [New York: Internat. Zeitungs-Verein, Jul 1885.] 1.

²⁵ Ibid., 22, 27.

²⁶ Timothy Messer-Kruse. *The Haymarket Conspiracy: Transatlantic Anarchist Networks* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 115.

²⁷ Johann Most to Victor Dave, New York, 12 May 1885. IISG.