

Baltic and Polish anarchism at the end of the 19th century

FA Poznań

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Baltic and Polish anarchism at the end of the 19th century

At the beginning of the twentieth century, anarchist anti-State ideals were most widely felt in what were then the western regions of the Russian Empire. This reflected both their proximity to the fast-changing social conflicts of Europe and the presence of significant national and cultural tensions within the occupied territories. Of great importance, in particular, was the placement of the Pale of Settlement of the Jewish population in Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Little Russian cities.

Although in other cities of Poland and the Baltic states the anarchist movement did not achieve the same gains as in Białystok in the north-east, for example, it nevertheless actively declared itself through the sympathies of the workers and craftsmen of Warsaw, Częstochowa, Vilnius, and Riga. The situation here was not much different from Białystok. Both Warsaw and Riga became, along with Białystok and Minsk, outposts of the most radical trends in Russian anarcho-communism – the Black Banners and the beznachal'tsy (literally “the leaderless”).

Łódź: The Weaver City

Poland was particularly turbulent. While the Jewish population, which also had a significant presence in Warsaw and Poland at this time, was struggling through Tsarist oppression, Poles were being repressed as part of Russia's response to the 1863 January Uprising and were near boiling point. Writing of the time, Polish anarchist Noj Granatsztajn recalled that:

“In two such centers as Łódź and Warsaw, workers worked 16–18 hours a day and received the smallest wages; they did not even have the opportunity to read books. Workers were enslaved by bandits who held the entire city in their hands and had the police at their disposal. There were thieves' gangs in all industrial cities.”

~ The First Mass Movement in the West of Russia in 1900
(pub. 1925)

From the end of the 19th century, the Polish labor movement was distinguished by its radical direct action. The proletariat of the textile industry in Warsaw and Łódź, the miners of the coal basin in Dombrowo and Sosnowice fought a continuous struggle against exploitation of the working population, using methods from strikes to sabotage. Various nationalist and social democratic parties tried to crush them as a result.

Among the urban Jewish population Zionists and Social Democrat “Bunda” were active, while among the Poles there was the PPS (Party of Polish Socialists). Hardline radicalism, much of it with an anarchist bent, emerged not just from the populace at large but was drawn from these larger left groups.

Nevertheless, the anarchist movement developed in Poland only in 1905, later than in Białystok, Nizhyn and Odessa, where the anarchists had already had two years of experience in the revolutionary struggle. The appearance of anarchists in Poland was accelerated by the revolutionary events of 1905. In a short time, the following anarchists' programmes were published in Polish:

Peter Kropotkin: Bread and Freedom
Errico Malatesta: Anarchy
Emile Henry: Courtroom Speech
Ludwig Stanislawovich Kulchitsky: Modern Anarchism
F Tonar: What Do Anarchists Want? (1907)

Jozef Zielinski: False Socialism, The General Strike and Labour Unions

Anarchist groups appeared in Warsaw, Łódź, Częstochowa and other cities. From the very beginning of their activity, the Polish anarchists gravitated towards radical and direct-action oriented methods of struggle.

In Łódź, a center of the textile industry, Granatstein began anarcho-communist propaganda. Like many of the pioneers of anarchism in the western provinces, Granatstein came from a poor Jewish family living in the small town of Belhotov, Petrokovskaya province. Belkhotov was a town of handicraft weavers who lived in poverty and worked in extremely difficult conditions. Granatstein joined this workforce aged 12 years old, but as a teenager could not stand the working conditions and fled, heading to Łódź — a larger industrial city. Here, settling in a factory, he met with the Bundists. The 13-year-old was caught up with revolutionary ideas and ready to fight. He joined up with the most radical Bund activists, consisting of workers in the clothing industry. During a trip to Warsaw Granatstein was arrested and, despite the fact that he was still only 14, was left to rot for nine months. This happened because a police officer, hoping to exploit the inexperience of youth, suggested he hand over his comrades. In response, Granatstein spat in the investigator's face.

After his release he participated in the famous Łódź uprising, and then, hiding from the persecution, left for Paris, where he joined the anarchists.

Returning to Łódź six months later, Granatstein and several like-minded people began propagandising anarchism and soon the Łódź group of communist anarchists appeared. A prominent role in this new organisation was played by 20-year-old painter Iosel Skomsky, who had previously worked in the Bund, transferred to the position of anarchism and shortly afterwards turned into the best agitator of the Łódź group.

On February 12th 1906 the police followed the trail of anarchists hiding in a safe house. Granatstein and five of his comrades were arrested and thrown into an "Investigation Prison", ul. Długa. Nevertheless, the anarchists succeeded in at least two major actions in Łódź — the murder in 1905 of wealthy manufacturer Juliusz Kunitser (known as the "cotton king") and in 1907 the killing of Poznan factory director David Rosenthal during a lockout.

Warsaw International

It was Warsaw however that became the main center of anarchism in Poland. Here, at the beginning of 1905, an foreign agitator nicknamed "Karl" founded the Warsaw Group of the Anarchist Communists "International". Like the Białystok "Struggle" group, the Warsaw International was, for the most part, a Jewish association. Its backbone was made up of workers — primarily former members of the Social Democratic Bund who had moved to anarchist positions. They conducted active propaganda in the Jewish quarters of Warsaw, inhabited by workers and artisans. Campaign meetings were held in the two main languages of Warsaw — Yiddish and Polish.

Active campaigning by the anarchists grew the active membership of the International group to 40 people, one of 10 propaganda circles which were created with more than 125 militants working together. As in Białystok, in Warsaw, most of the participants in the anarchist movement were very young — around 18–20.

Through agitation and propaganda in the Jewish quarters the anarchists very quickly shifted to active participation in the economic struggle of the Warsaw workers. Most often they used radical methods. During the bakers' strike anarchists of the Internationale blew up several ovens and poured kerosene over the dough. In the face of these tactics owners started to immediately fulfill the demands of striking workers if they knew the anarchists were involved. The Warsaw anarchists were ardent supporters of propaganda of the deed and their most high-profile sorties in Warsaw saw bombs thrown by Israel Blumenfeld (later executed in a government crackdown) into the exchange office of the banker Shereshevsky and at the Bristol hotel-restaurant, where two people were injured.

The strengthening position of the anarchists was met with a sharply negative reaction from socialist parties, which published articles criticising the theory and tactics of anarchism. There were even cases of armed clashes between anarchists and socialists. Murders of anarchists by socialist militants during strikes and other mass protests weren't unknown. In Czestochow for example the anarchist Wittmann was killed.

Warsaw anarchists took an active part in the October 1905 strike, speaking to thousands of spectators at workers' rallies, and shortly afterwards there was a spate of mass arrests against everyone who was suspected of involvement in anarchism. The first man to be arrested while distributing proclamations among city army soldiers was Victor Rivkind. Given his age, 17, he was sentenced to four years of hard labor. After Rivkind police arrested several more active members of the Internationale, smashed its printing house, and seized an underground warehouse containing weapons and dynamite.

The arrested anarchists were thrown into the cells of Warsaw prison, where they were tortured and tortured by the gendarmes, led by Detective Green. It turned out that the Internationale group had been planning to dig under the barracks of the Volyn regiment and was intending to build a false barricade on Marshalkovskaya Street, stuffed with two mines and a bundle of metal fragments. It was hoped that when soldiers and police began to disassemble the barricade it would explode and cause significant damage. Upon receiving this information, the Warsaw Governor General Skalon became furious and ordered all 16 arrested suspects to be hanged without trial.

In January 1906, 16 anarchists in the Warsaw Citadel were executed: Solomon Rosenzweig, Jacob Goldstein, Victor Rivkind, Leib Furzeig, Jacob Crystal, Jacob Pfeffer, Cuba Igolson, Israel Blumenfeld, Solomon Schaer, Abram Rothkopf, Isaac Shapiro, Ignat Kornbaum, Karl Skurzha, F.G. and S. Menzhelevsky.

All the people killed were very young — students and artisans, most between 18 and 20 years of age. The oldest, Jacob Goldstein, was 23 and the youngest, Isaac Shapiro and Karl Skurzha, were 17 and 15 respectively. After this reprisal the bodies of the dead were thrown into the Vistula, the faces filled with resin so that they could not be identified. In the spring fishermen caught several mutilated bodies in the Wisla with bullet wounds and tarred faces.

During the searches and arrests one activist of the Internationale managed to escape. A young turner Holtzman, nicknamed Varyat, was engaged in the manufacture of bombs in his apartment and, fearing arrest, fled, taking dynamite and several shells with him. On a street in Warsaw, he met a patrol who drove an arrested man. Holtzman opened fire on convoys, wounded a soldier

and gave the arrested person the opportunity to escape, but he was captured. He was escorted to Alekseevsky Fort. Holtzman was threatened with the death penalty, but he managed to escape, despite his leg broken during the escape, and disappeared outside the Russian Empire.

Repression virtually destroyed the International group. The surviving anarchists were escorted to hard labour and to permanent internal exile in Siberia. Those who were fortunate enough to remain free all emigrated. So, tragically ended the first period of anarchist activity in Warsaw, which saw no further activity for the next seven months.

It wasn't until the fall of 1906, when the wave of police repressions had subsided somewhat, that the activities of anarchists were revived in Warsaw. In addition to the revived International group, new associations appeared — the Liberty group and the Warsaw group of anarchists — the communists of Black Banner. The Chernoznamens managed to release two issues of the newspaper Revolutionary Voice (*Głos rewolucyjny*) in 1906 and 1907. in Polish and Yiddish.

As in 1905, during the winter of 1906 the anarchists took an active part in the class struggle of the Warsaw proletariat. The workers responded to a sewing workshops lockout with acts of sabotage, dousing goods with sulfuric acid. In the workshop of Korob, anarchists killed several craftsmen during a strike. Terrified owners decided to fulfill the demands of the strikers. During one of the expropriations, an entrepreneur was also killed, for which an anarchist, Zilberstein was betrayed to a military field court. In December 1906, anarchist militants Joseph Myslinsky, Tselek and Savely Sudobiger (Tsalka Portny), from Białystok, were hanged in the Warsaw Citadel in revenge for the murder of the assistant chief of the Warsaw Prison, known for his cruelty to those arrested. He had been shot dead on May 14th, 1907 by a fighter of the International, Beinish Rosenblum. On November 7th Rosenblum to death, and the anarchist refused to ask for pardon from Tsar Nicholas II. He was hanged in the Warsaw prison on November 11th, 1907.

The Warsaw Citadel became the place of execution for many other revolutionaries, who were brought to Warsaw from all the western provinces of the empire. Transferred from Białystok, Avel Kossovsky and Isaac Geylikman were accused of armed resistance to the police during a general strike in 1906 in the town of Suprasla and were also sentenced to death. Kossovsky's execution was replaced with life imprisonment, and Geylikman was hanged.

However, the activities of Polish anarchists were not limited to acts of economic terror and the killing of police officers. Many Warsaw revolutionaries pursued more global goals. So, in the first half of 1907, a secret society arose in Warsaw, which set as its goal the assassination of the German emperor Wilhelm II.

It was believed that Wilhelm was a malign influence on his cousin Nicholas II, recommending that he not weaken the oppression of the Polish population. Wilhelm's murder would not only avenge this bullying of the Polish people, but would also increase the popularity of the anarchist movement both in Russia and Germany, and throughout Europe as a whole.

Four militants settled in Charlottenburg to organise the assassination, and were shortly contacted by "August Waterloos" (a pseudonym for the Prussian anarchist also known as Senna Hoy, aka Johannes Holzmann), who was active in the German-held part of Poland. The Białystok anarchists Leibel Crazy and Meitke Białystok intended to arrive in Charlottenburg, but on the way Meitke was killed, forcing them to abandon the attempt and leave the city.

In July 1907, a conference of Polish and Lithuanian anarchist groups was held in Kovno, where participants came to the following decisions:

In view of the fragmentation and isolation of anarchist groups, it is necessary to unite in a federation.

To reject minor expropriations and robberies and recognise the need for large-scale expropriations in state and private institutions. Recognise that only a federation is capable of organising such expropriations and that it is expedient and economical to spend the funds obtained.

To fight through propaganda with the trade unions as a dangerous and cunning means of the bourgeoisie to seduce the worker from the revolutionary path to the path of compromises and deals that obscure his class revolutionary consciousness.

To recognise the need for mass looting of food warehouses and stores with a general strike, lock-outs and unemployment.

This meeting was infiltrated however and a denunciation by police provocateur Abram Havenda (“Abrash”) saw 24 participants at the conference of anarcho-communist groups arrested. Among the detainees was Waterloos. The trial of the participants in the Coven conference took place on September 11th-19th, 1908 in Warsaw. Only three defendants were acquitted while 21 people were sentenced to various terms of hard labor from four to 15 years, including Waterloos who served the maximum term. The remaining Warsaw group of anarchist communists, the Internationale, lasted until the spring of 1909, ceasing its activities as a result of a general decline in revolutionary activity.

Doomsday in Riga

Another troubled region of the Russian Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century was the Baltic states. Like the Poles, the inhabitants of the Baltic countries waged a brutal and bloody struggle against the tsarist regime. In rural areas, Latvian peasants resorted to methods of agrarian terror, seizing vacant lands and cutting down landowner forests. Landless farm labourers, who had nothing to lose, were especially radical.

After the peasant uprisings were suppressed many of their participants, fleeing the punitive detachments formed by local landowners with the support of the authorities, went into the woods. There they formed detachments of “forest brothers” — partisans, attacking landlords’ estates and even groups of bailiffs under cover of night. Even in winter, despite intense frosts, the partisans hiding in the forests of the Courland province did not stop their activities. They lived in huts, hidden in thickets and covered with sheepskins brought by peasants, and ate meat obtained from hunting or from attacks on landowners’ livestock yards.

The Forest Brothers movement that unfolded in Courland Province, although it did not proclaim itself officially anarchist, was anarchist in nature. There were no bosses in the units of the “forest brothers”, decisions were made by general consensus and no-one obeyed anyone. One writer known as Strams, who left memories of the activities of the “forest brothers” in the early years of the twentieth century, emphasised that participation in these formations was absolutely voluntary, on the other hand, most of the militants never refused to perform even the most dangerous and difficult tasks (From the history of the “forest brothers” movement in Dondangen (Courland province) — in Almanac. Collection on the history of the anarchist movement in Russia. Volume 1. Paris, 1909, p. 68).

The first anarchist groups appeared in cities in 1905, initially among the poorest Jewish proletariat and artisans of Riga. Among the Latvian workers and peasants, anarchist groups appeared

only in the spring of 1906. Quickly enough, the anarchists spread their activities not only to the Jewish quarters of Riga, but also to Libau, Mitau, Tuksum and Yuriev. Propaganda was conducted in Yiddish and in the Latvian language, less often using German. As in Bialystok, some of the most radical socialists and social democrats left the ranks of their parties and joined the anarchists.

A group appeared in Riga, named after the Warsaw group — the Riga group of anarchist communists, the International. It was predominantly Jewish-led, once again its members tended to be extremely young and they conducted propaganda among the Jewish poor. For propaganda purposes, the Riga International issued in Yiddish a number of proclamations including To all workers, Political or social revolution, To all true friends of the people and To all clerks, as well as pamphlets by E Nakhta General strike and social revolution, Is anarchism necessary in Russia? and Order and the commune.

A little later, in Riga, the actual Latvian groups of the anarchist communists “Word and deed”, “Equality” and the flying combat detachment “Doomsday” arose. In Latvian, Kropotkin’s Bread and Freedom, three issues of a satirical collection Black Laughter, Flames and Critical Essays were published. The most active anarchists of Riga carried out propaganda at the car-building factories of Felser and Phoenix, and then at the factories beyond Dvina. In October 1906, the Federation of Riga Anarchist Communist Groups was created, which united the groups operating in the city.

One of the most notorious armed actions of Riga anarchists was involved in a clash with the police in August 1906. When police surrounded an anarchist laboratory, the brother and sister pair of Keide-Krievs, who were members, defended the house from six in the morning, firing all day. They blew up a ladder and threw a bomb at the police, but it did not cause them much harm. Not wanting to fall into the hands of the police, brother and sister Keide-Krievs committed suicide. On the same day, on Mariinsky Street, anarchists put up armed resistance to the police, for which militant Bentsion Schots was sentenced to 14 years’ hard labour.

The selbtschutz, German nationalist “self-protection” units which later became more formalised paramilitary forces, also became a favorite target of the anarchists. These formations were recruited from the younger generations of reactionary German families in order to confront the anarchists, socialists and, in general, radical opposition. In Yuryev the selbtschutz numbered about 300 people. Of course, from time to time, anarchists and socialists had to confront the ultra-right. So, during a meeting in the mitava suburb, the anarchists detonated a bomb, followed by another which exploded during a similar gathering on Vendenskaya Street. In both cases there were casualties.

During a strike of tram employees in Riga, anarchists threw several bombs to paralyze the movement of those trams that continued to operate. The most high-profile act of anti-bourgeois terror was the explosion of two bombs thrown by anarchists at the Schwartz restaurant — a favorite place for gatherings of Riga capitalists. Although the explosions did not inflict casualties, the resonance in society and the panic among the bourgeoisie were enormous.

In January 1907, police officers who planned to raid Riga anarchists met with fierce resistance on Artillery Street. Anarchists managed to shoot two soldiers and police supervisor Berkovich, while injuring detectives Dukman and Davus and the Riga secret police chief Gregg. Later that summer police, chasing the expropriators, were attacked by anarchists who accidentally passed by, fired at the police and then disappeared into a nearby grove.

Naturally, the tsarist authorities tried to suppress these movements. In 1906–1907 many Riga revolutionaries were arrested. The anarchists Stur, Podzin, Kreuzberg and Tirumnek received eight years of hard labor, while 12 years of imprisonment were received by soldiers of the engineer division Korolev and Ragulin, 14 years of hard labor by Bentsion Schots. During a beating in a Riga prison which included ten bayonet attacks, anarchist prisoner Vladimir Shmoge was killed.

On October 23th 1906, a military court issued a death sentence to captured militants of the Riga International. Silin Shafron, Osip Levin, Petrov, Osipov and Ioffe were sentenced to be executed despite their young age. Before the death of the three condemned Jews, the rabbi offered to hear their repentance. To this proposal, the anarchists answered as one as one that they had nothing to repent of.

Sixteen-year-old Osip Levin, a native of a poor family, said: “Of all the money we took from the capitalists for our holy Anarchy, I didn’t even allow myself to make a pair of trousers ... I am dying in the old pants that my student brother gave me because I went ragged ... My money was holy and I used it for holy purposes. I find that I am dying not as a sinner, but as a fighter for all of humanity, for those oppressed by the present system (Taken from Leaflets of the Minsk Group, collected in Almanac. Collection on the History of the Anarchist Movement in Russia. Volume 1. Paris, 1909, p. 182) .

All those executed died with an exclamation: “Long live the earth and will!” Even the liberal newspapers of Riga, which did not often offer sympathy for the revolutionary movement and especially anarchists, were indignant at the brutal execution of young revolutionaries in the Riga prison. They noted that even among the soldiers of the firing squad there were no people willing to kill teenagers. The soldiers shot to the side, purposely tried to miss, but the command was adamant. It took several volleys to kill them all.

Yankovists

Repression directed against communist anarchists forced a change in tactics from anti-authoritarian groups, with many Latvian revolutionaries turned to anarcho-syndicalist activities. At the end of 1907 a group arose in Riga, which, due to its low fame in Russian historical literature, should be specifically mentioned. A free workers’ organisation was created on the initiative of a private teacher, Y. Ya. Yankau received, by the name of its leader, a second name – the Yankovist syndicalists. In Riga, the activities of the Yankovists were led by J. Grivin and J. A. Lassis.

The ideology of the Free Workers Organisation had much in common with the “Makhnovshchina“, characterised by a sharply negative attitude towards the intelligentsia and a desire for self-organisation of the working class without the participation of political parties. Accepting only the workers in their ranks, the Yankovists opposed the proletariat to all other classes and social strata, and were especially negative towards the intelligentsia. Speaking for illegal and radical methods of resistance to capital, the Yankovists divided them into “passive” ones – strikes, and “active ones” – expropriations and acts of economic terror, which included the destruction of factories and plants, the destruction of equipment and other sabotage.

The highest form of resistance for the Yankovists was the economic revolution, destroying “slavery in all its forms” and organizing “the life of workers’ producers on the basis of economic

equality.” The SRO ranks were replenished mainly due to the radical members of the Social Democracy of the Latvian Territory (militants, party members expelled for violation of discipline, etc.), as well as former members of the Latvian Social Democratic Union and trade union representatives.

The Yankovists tried to spread their propaganda and to influence as far as possible both legal and illegal labour unions. Members of SROs did not pay dues, money came to the organisation’s desk through expropriations from state, public and private institutions, as well as through performances and evenings held in the building of the Latvian Society in Riga.

In January 1908 the Yankovists came into contact with syndicalist anarchists operating in Riga and planned to publish a joint magazine. In the spring and summer of 1908, a further rapprochement of the Yankovists and the anarchist-syndicalists was observed. Both those and others jointly campaigned in working environments for the wider use of legal trade unions, especially for spreading legal propaganda. In July 1908 most of the Yankovists joined legal unions while adhering to the anarcho-syndicalist program. In September 1908, the Free Workers’ Organisation ceased to exist, its remnants partly joined the syndicalist anarchists, partly Latvian Social Democracy. Yankau himself emigrated to Germany.

As in other regions of the Russian Empire, by 1908–1909. the anarchist movement in Poland and the Baltic countries had significantly declined in popularity and lost the positions that were acquired during the years of the revolution of 1905–1907. Many anarchists were executed by the sentences of the military field courts or died in skirmishes with the police, some were destined to go to Siberian penal servitude for many years.

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