
THE STORY OF ANARCHISM in the United States remains, in so many ways, a mystery. Not mainly because anarchists have been conspiratorial, although some certainly were and are, for good reason, but because until recent decades, most of the activity and publications took place in languages other than English. Imagine a historian treating the differences and similarities of anarchist immigrant groups and their largely working class followings in Italian, Spanish, Russian, Hungarian, and Yiddish, then congratulate yourself on the power of imagination: no such historian exists or seems likely to exist.

The dilemma is redoubled by class. Up to the present, English language anarchists come from the middle classes; the leading exception, working class Wobblies, would not necessarily call themselves anarchists at all, and these ranks, too, have shifted into college-going activists. Real working class anarchism might best be found, even forty years ago, among the oldtimers who remembered the Spanish Civil War and who devotedly read the longest-lived American anarchist publication, Fraya Arbeter Shtimme (Free Voice of Labor, 1890-1976).

Forty Years in the Struggle recalls an FAS loyalist or Khaver (roughly, "Comrade"), one Chaim Weinberg, who took part in most of the activities of anarchists from the 1890s to the 1930s around him in Philadelphia. He propagandized, worked in unions, organized collective or cooperative businesses, farms, and households, but most of all he was an orator and debater of great skill, at least in Yiddish. His friend Thomas Eygnes, in a fascinating introduction written for the 1952 Yiddish-language version of this text, describes Weinberg as one of the great "free thinkers" of the era, at least as eager to debate the pious as to debate the bosses' representatives, to raise money for the cause (often to keep a publication going, or to support members persecuted by the authorities), or just to entertain an audience eager for a night out with a luminary.

When he left London for the United States, Eyges recalls first-hand, the audience begged him not to depart. Long before he reached thirty years here, he had drifted into obscurity. There hangs a tale.

In no small part, with the coming of the First World War, the heroic era of anarchism had passed almost everywhere, albeit not in Spain and selected other locations. Perhaps, at least many argued or complained at the time, the Bolsheviks had stolen their glory with their own forms of direct action. More likely, in my reading and my interviewing of oldtimers, the optimism demanded by anarchist causes (and not only theirs) had simply died when workers, by tens and hundreds of thousands, slaughtered each other in a conflict that had no right or wrong side, and most arguably had its foundation in the craving for empire.

The vanished success of American anarchism, EngHsh-language style, had been dependent upon causes like birth control, Greenwich Villager free love and free art, and upon the I. W. W. Here lay the great contradictions of the anarchists - and the central problem of this intriguing memoir volume.
In later generations, it was noted that Jewish anarchism and Zionism had many points of continuity. The wish to create a changed society before the fall of capitalism lay behind the kibbutz movement, and those radicals who reviled Leninism (whether for good or bad reasons) often found common enemies and common friends. There was also a certain mistrust of the gentiles, including gvyisheworking people who might be faithful to calls for class solidarity but might, at some moment, turn against Jews - or so they believed. And so Jewish anarchists in particular early and often sought institutional support from notably non-socialist, non-anarchist allies.

Chaim Leib Weinberg, militant anarchist, was thus more than indifferent toward the IWW, and more than friendly toward the most conservative labor movement within the industrialized world, the American Federation of Labor. Time and again, Weinberg recalls, he was sent on missions to win garment workers back from the awful lure of the IWW, to the safety of the AFL. Resisting a certain socialist demand to abandon the AFL back in the 1890s, a bloc of Jewish anarchists had already gone over to Gompers (who had early made his fame lobbying against Chinese immigrants, and continued to lobby against new immigration, including that of Jews). In return, they received patronage, jobs, and money. Weinberg followed in their footsteps. The Yiddish speaking anarchists continued anarchist propaganda activities of various kinds in various locations, and received financial assistance from AFL in return, that of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) becoming the most important. They did not seem to feel the need to rationalize their loyalty, and continued on unchanged when the assigned enemy was the mostly youthful Communist cadre in the garment unions of the 1920s. The machine could count upon them, and did.

Then there was the issue of the War. Jewish-Americans overwhelmingly opposed the U.S. entry, and it is likely (although no certainty exists) that Jewish anarchists, in every category, felt much as Emma Goldman did, that this was a war among bosses, dragging working people to their doom. The Traya Arbeter Shtimme's editors felt otherwise, arguing (with Peter Kropotkin) that the spectre of Russian tyranny demanded support of the allies. When Russia fell, it was the spectre of German tyranny. And then the danger of the Bolsheviks, or (for this milieu) the promises offered by Woodrow Wilson legitimating union activity of the AFL while driving the IWW to the brink with persecution.

It seems harsh to put matters quite this directly, but the context is unavoidable. Italian-American anarchists, bitterly opposed to the war, were suppressed, alongside the IWW, with violence as no radical group since the Haymarket anarchists of the 1880s and not until the Black Panthers. A number of prominent anarchists or former anarchists emerged as labor editors, foremost the editor of the Traya Arbeter Shtimme himself. Former socialists who supported the war and now supported Gompers and his successors got similar sinecures.

There is, of course, much more to the story. The FAS had become a sort of organ of free thought and literary-cultural considerations in Yiddish, and we might expect Weinberg to be part of an aging crowd along these lines, bringing in cultural speakers to local venues, and so on (unfortunately, there is no mention of this in the book). The anarchist movement took on new life, but not many younger members, when the Spanish Revolution broke out and the need for logistical and financial help became enormous. Once again, Emma Goldman was often at the
center of the picture, more than occasionally resented for her celebrity but also supported by many of the faithful. Weinberg himself passed away in 1939, just as anarchists faced yet another crisis, the Second World War. Many anarchists, Wobblies in particular, were to become passive resisters and go to jail; others took the cause of a U.S. victory with a renewed determination and for better reasons than before. But most of these followed up with the cause of anti-Communism, and key anarchist or anarchist sympathizers of another and smaller generation were rewarded with plum positions, this time mostly within Jewish institutions. Throughout, the importance of memory, anarchist memory of holding up the banner of freedom had remained crucial, but also definitely partial and in many ways deceptive.

None of this should bar readers from reading and enjoying Forty Years in the Struggle. Indeed, the historical ambiguities may provide food for contemplating the role of erstwhile sixties radicals who have become energetic imperial hawks (often, not always, to the considerable benefit of their careers) in the decades since. Immigrant anarchists, at least the Yiddish speakers, are fascinating partly because they never quite lost their belief in the wisdom of Kropotkin and others, or their love for Yiddish language and culture, even as they turned from the Cold War to the occupation of the West Bank in their main sympathies. (ALivingRevolution by James Horrox, another recent volume, offers a well-researched and written history of kibbutzim as deeply sincere and semi-anarchist in tradition but also nurseries for anti-Palestinian nationalism and Israeli soldiers' brutal behavior, filling out this picture painfully.) The oldtime Yiddishists were unique, rooted however distantly in blue collar life, and are now gone forever. The claims of their successors are awfully thin by comparison.

Sidebar

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Word count: 1486

Indexing (details)

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Subject
Anarchism:
Fund raising;
Jews:
Yiddish language
Database
Alt-PressWatch