

Mikhail Bakunin against Insurrectionism

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Translator introduction

Anarchism has a history. It has changed over time, and has been different in different places. There is a ‘mainstream’ of the movement, a socialism that is decentralist and believes in the self-organization of the people as workers and as citizens. Yet there has always been a small minority of self-described ‘anarchists’, governed by emotions rather than ideals, who look for ‘shortcuts’ to avoid the long patient work of organization.

Throughout history anarchists have always advocated the tactic of ‘direct action’ rather than depending upon ‘saviors’. Some, however, fail to understand what this means and imagine that it is nothing more than militancy and violence. Of course not !

Such people delude themselves in various ways. They refuse to see that they are a minority, usually a very small minority and award themselves the title of being The People. This attitude is usually coupled with a quite visible contempt for The People as they actually are.

This minority thread has run through the history of the movement, and in recent years its believers have awarded themselves the title of an ideology — insurrectionism. It goes without saying that this is rather grandiose and even absurd, advocacy of a (historically futile) tactic is supposed to be a ‘system’ of political thought.

These people like to refer to Bakunin as an example that they emulate. The following from the Groupe Salvador-Segui of the Fédération anarchiste challenges this. It presents a Bakunin different from the myth, a Bakunin who learned and changed over time — a mature and thoughtful Bakunin.

Bakunin against Insurrectionism

At the International Congress of Saint- Imier , held in September 1872 the federations of the AIT rejected the decisions of the Hague Congress which had just taken place , and decided that the International would continue , but on a new basis. It was a resounding success for the federalist current ; unfortunately, this success did not last ; the seeds of dissension , which had been previously contained, gradually came to light, revealing that the ‘anti authoritarian’ AIT was divided into a current that could be called revolutionary pre-syndicalist in particular including James Guillaume, and a pre-anarchist current with mainly Italian militants.

In explaining the reorientation followed by the movement , it is difficult to distinguish between the repression suffered by the labor movement after the Commune, the disappearance of the generation of the heroic era of the AIT , the emergence of a new, more hurried and less educated generation , and the new conditions created by the concentration of industry , the massive appearance of machinery. We must also consider that many militants really thought the revolution was at hand, and to wake up the apathetic masses , we had to give them a push.

Bakunin thought that misery and despair are not enough to spark a social revolution ; they are sufficient , he said in ‘Statism and Anarchy’ , “to give birth to local uprisings , but not enough to lift large masses . For this it is necessary that an entire people has a common standard , [...] a general idea of its rights and a deep faith , passionate , religious, if you will, in those rights. Because neither writers nor philosophers , nor their works, nor finally the socialist papers , do not yet make make a living and powerful socialism. The latter only finds real existence in the enlightened revolutionary instinct in the collective will and their own organization of the working masses themselves — and when this instinct , this will and organization are lacking, the best books world are nothing but theories in a vacuum, impotent dreams.”¹

There are three inseparable elements in this dialectic of revolutionary development : the revolutionary instinct ; the collective will ; the organization. Bakunin summed up perfectly the anarchist point of view and, in some ways it is more “Marxist” than many Marxists, ... The revolutionary instinct of the masses to rise up spontaneously against an intolerable situation is a fact we see in every human group and that evidently applies to the working class. But revolutionary spontaneity is only a moment of the revolutionary process . The collective will or, if you will, the political project , and the organization through which the struggle will be conducted and the project will

¹ “Letters to a Frenchman on the current crisis,” in 1870.

be implemented , are equally indispensable.² This is far from the idea that just an insurrectionary act caused by a small minority is sufficient to awaken the consciousness of the masses .

Bakunin had experienced several insurrections , he knew what they meant in terms of human lives. This is why he remained cautious and anxious to avoid sending people to the slaughterhouse. Thus we find a ‘cautious’ Bakunin corresponding little to the militaristic picture³ : he was extremely critical of those who lead the people into adventurist actions and who “ imagine that they only need to be formed into small conspiratorial centers “ leading “ with at most a few hundred workers , and suddenly raising a simultaneous uprising , for the masses to follow. But first, they have never organized a simultaneous uprising “⁴. It makes you wonder if the “ insurrectionary “ who claim Bakunin have read him .

In fact, the Bakunin’s criticism of insurrectionism revealed in his letter to Celsio Cerretti is addressed to supporters of Mazzini, but it can equally well be applied to others. It still takes on Mazzini’s followers whose companies “have had the invariable result of a bloody and sometimes even ridiculous fiasco ,” which endlessly repeat a “terrible succession of painful abortions.” “Every spring, they start again, attributing all these past defeats not to inherent defects of their system, but to some secondary circumstances, unfavorable accidents ...”⁵ Mazzini never understood that “the masses begin to move only when they are pushed by powers — both interests and principles — that emanate from their own lives, and abstractions born outside this life will never perform this action on them. Deceived by this constant illusion of his life, he believed until the last moment that we could make a revolution by a surprise coup, and that several hundred young people spread in small groups throughout the country spontaneously and simultaneously taking weapons , would be sufficient to arouse the nation.”⁶ It goes without saying that the criticism against Mazzini can be extended to the anarchists.

What will happen , Bakunin asks again, if the power destroys your organization? An uprising? That would be great, he said, “ if you could have the hope of triumph. But can you have it ? Are you adequately prepared , solidly organized enough for that? Do you have the certainty to raise with you the whole of the Romagna, including the peasants? If so, pick up the gauntlet thrown to you . But if you do not have this confidence — I ‘m not talking about illusions , but a trust based on positive facts — then willingly have the strength to suppress your natural indignation , avoid a battle

² There is a Bakunin text entitled “Written against Marx,” in which the dialectic of the acquisition of political consciousness of the working class is remarkably demonstrated.

³ Bakunin said the same thing about striking workers, “Who knows what every single strike represents for the suffering and sacrifices of workers ? “(“ International Revolutionary Alliance of Socialist Democracy. “)

⁴ Letter Ceretti, 13–27 March 1872.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

that must end in defeat for you. Remember that a new defeat would be fatal not only for you but for all of Europe.”⁷

For Bakunin the revolution was not an act of mass violence; it was the overthrow of a political and social order providing you knew what you wanted to put in its place : “No one can want to destroy unless having at the least a distant vision, true or false, of the order of things that should to him follow that which currently exists; and if this vision is living in him, its destructive force becomes more powerful ; the more it approaches the truth, that is to say more it conforms to the necessary development of the current social world , the more its destructive effects become beneficial and useful.”⁸ This is an unequivocal condemnation of insurrectionism.

In October 1873 Bakunin wrote a very moving letter to the “companions of the Jura Federation,” announcing to them his resignation from the AIT . “For four and a half years pretty much as we all know, despite all the artifices of our common enemies and the infamous calumnies they have poured out against me, you kept your esteem for me, your friendship and your trust. You are not even intimidated by the name “Bakuninists” that was thrown in your faces.” In his letter Bakunin rejoices that his friends had won victory “against the ambitious intrigues of Marxists, and in favor of freedom of the proletariat and the whole future of the International”. This letter was written a year after the establishment of the ‘anti-authoritarian’ International ‘. The Russian revolutionary was tired, sick. He thought that the International no longer needed him.

“I have many reasons to act like this. Do not think that this is primarily because of the personal dislikes with which I have been drenched in recent years. I’m not saying that I am absolutely insensitive; yet I still feel strong enough to resist if I thought my further participation in your work, your struggles, could be of some use to the triumph of the cause of the proletariat. But I do not think that”.⁹

By birth , he said , he was only a bourgeois , and as such he couldn’t do anything but theoretical propaganda. “Well , I have this belief that the time for great theoretical discourse , printed or spoken , is past. In the past nine years, within the International, more ideas were developed than it would take to save the world , if ideas alone could save it, and I challenge anyone to invent a new one . It is no longer the time for ideas; it is time for facts and acts. What matters most today is the organization of the forces of the proletariat. But this organization must be the work of the proletariat itself.”¹⁰

The purpose is very clear: it is time for action, that is to say, “ **the organizational strength of the proletariat**” , which must be “**the work of the proletariat**”

⁷ Letter to Celso Ceretti, 13–27 March 1872.

⁸ Bakunin, “Protest of the Alliance.” 1871

⁹ “Letter to the companions of the Jura Federation”, first fortnight of October, 1873.

¹⁰ Ibid.

itself .” Bakunin concludes his letter of October 1873 with a recommendation that the militants who will engage in terrorism or insurgency ignored : “ 1. Hold fast to your principles of great and broad popular freedom, without which equality and solidarity are themselves all lies . 2. Always organize more practical, militant international solidarity of the workers of all trades and all countries, and remember that infinitely weak as individuals, as communities and as individual countries you will find there is a huge , irresistible force in this universal community. “¹¹

The “**victory of liberty and the International against the authoritarian intrigue**” , in the words of Bakunin , will be a Pyrrhic victory . Especially since, interpreting these words in their own way, the Italian activists will engage in insurrectionary attempts which will end miserably and precipitate the collapse of the anti-authoritarian International.

Two months later in January 1874 the Italian militants formed the Italian Committee for the Social Revolution that will organize several attempts at popular uprisings by small groups of activists without contact with the proletariat, even the “people” they were supposed to wake up from their torpor , and in total contradiction to the injunctions of Bakunin.

Some Italian militants, among them Malatesta and Cafiero , threw themselves between 1874 and 1877 into armed movements that failed or ended in ridicule . Thus, on 5 April 1877 , Malatesta, Costa, Cafiero , and thirty armed men besieged two villages in Benevento, east of Naples, burned the archives and distributed the money found in the office of the tax collector.

“A small armed band, led by Cafiero and Malatesta, landed without warning in one of the villages , announcing that the world will change, it acts to abolish the State and property in the municipality followed next by abolishing them completely. Welcomed by the population with the priest at their head, the internationalists then seized the town hall, carried the archives and property titles to the town square where they burned them.”¹²

There were no casualties. The same scene took place in several villages with an unenthusiastic welcome from the population. Our revolutionaries then wandered for a few days in the countryside, numb with cold, and were eventually arrested. At the end of their trial, members of the Benevento expedition even suffered the indignity of being seen to be acquitted , which shows how they were not taken seriously. Despite the total fiasco of such insurrectionary actions , this seems to have impressed many anarchists .

Yet five years earlier Bakunin had warned his Italian friends against such initiatives : in a letter to Celsio Cerretti , he wrote that “**it doesn’t have to be that**

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Marianne Enckell, *the Jura Federation*, Canvas editor, p. 186.

the revolution dishonors itself by an insane movement and the idea of a revolutionary uprising falls into ridicule.¹³

On 3 December 1876, the Bulletin of the Jura Federation published a letter from Carlo Cafiero to Malatesta in which he states : “The Italian Federation believes that insurrectional action, intended to assert socialist principles by deeds, is the most effective means of propaganda . “ One can say that this letter is in some way the birth of anarchism , it invalidates the AIT as a class structure and sets it up as an affinity group — which was totally against position of Bakunin. To support their view , the Italians based themselves on certain texts that the Russian revolutionary had written at the end of his life, but giving them a meaning totally contrary to what he had said .

Anarchist action was defined in Le Révolté in 1880 : “The permanent revolt in speech, in writing, by the dagger , gun , dynamite [...] everything that is not legal is good to us.”¹⁴ It should be noted that this phrase , which appeared in the magazine that Kropotkin ran, was falsely attributed to him — but we can rightly think that he approved . It is found in an article entitled “Action “ , unsigned, of which Carlo Cafiero was the author. Often quoted, phrase is truncated because in the means of action recommended after dynamite the article adds, “ **Or even , sometimes , by the ballot , when it’s a matter of voting for Blanqui and Trinquet , ineligible ...**” Kropotkin will distance himself from the attacks , again in a very subdued and ambiguous manner , when the anarchist movement itself distanced itself.

On 14 July 1881 the anarchists met in congress in London to try to reorganize the movement with Kropotkin presiding . This congress is sometimes wrongly presented as a congress of the AIT . There were thirty-one delegates representing thirteen countries , a range that will not be seen again for a long time, but that does not mean a large body of members. Representatives from Serbia , Turkey , Egypt mixed with German delegates , Swiss , English, Italian, Belgian , French, Dutch , Spanish, Russian and American . Also present were representatives from federations of the anti-authoritarian International , which made it wrong to say this it was a congress of the AIT.

Two motions were passed: the first, which will never be applied, provided for the creation of an “international information office.” The other motion, referring to the AIT, said that it had “recognized a need to join verbal and written propaganda with propaganda by the deed”. The reference to the AIT was , however, distorted because to the International “propaganda by the deed” meant the creation of workers’ societies, mutuals, cooperatives, libraries, etc. The motion proposed to “spread the spirit of revolt” and to bring about action “on the ground of illegality which is the only road to revolution”: “The technical and chemical sciences have already rendered services to the revolutionary cause and are being called to make still greater in the future, the

¹³ Letter Ceretti, 17 March 1872.

¹⁴ Rebel, December 25, 1880, quoted by Jean Maitron.

Congress recommends that organizations and individuals [...] give great weight to the study and application of these sciences, as a means of defense and attack. ”

There is something childish in such proclamations , which are reminiscent of powerless ranting against a situation where nothing can be changed. Yet these calls, which favored any manipulative interpretation , would lead to the worst excesses — the worst being the attack on a theater in Barcelona in November 1893 , which claimed 80 victims.

The heirs of the Spanish section of the AIT , when to them, interpreted the call to “propaganda by the deed” in a perfectly “orthodox” manner , that is to say, in the exact sense in which the term was defined by the AIT . Applying it to their congress of 1873, they will call for support for strikes, creating resistance funds, to organizing events , meetings , consumer cooperatives networks, establishing schools , libraries , education centers, mutualist societies and employment agencies. The fact is that the Spanish section was the only one to retain the character of a mass organization.

Note that the anti-worker repression in Spain was no less fierce than in France. Unfortunately, in both countries , the destructive attacks against the labor organizations will not come only from the state or bosses, but from a part of the anarchist movement itself. In France , the anarcho-communists showed themselves as opposed any industrial action that did not lead directly to the revolution , and in fact they will cut themselves off from the workers’ movement.

I conclude by quoting Gaston Leval , “After tirelessly advocating constructive methods that have remained unknown to all anarchists — maybe there was there a few exceptions that I do not know — Bakunin , after the failure of the revolutionary attempts which he had taken part and before those of the Commune, came to the conclusion that “ the hour of revolution had passed . “ He then recommended “ propaganda by deed “ and listened to the direct realizations serving as examples . But demagoguery and stupidity was the law in the anarchist movement; the formula was interpreted as a recommendation of individual attacks , which had nothing to do with the thought of the great fighter.¹⁵

Leval alludes to the last letter written by Bakunin to his friend Elysee Reclus on 15 February . 1875. In fact Bakunin wanted to say that a revolutionary cycle had passed and a long reaction period had begun. He meant that the revolution is not necessarily on the agenda all the time. We are now , he says, in a downward cycle , in which “ thought, hope and revolutionary passion absolutely can’t be found in the masses “. During such periods , “we will fight in vain, we will do nothing”.

¹⁵ Gaston Leval, Permanent Crisis anarchism.

Conclusion

Insurrectionism like as individualism besides, are two closely related phenomena that can be analyzed in the same way. This is, roughly, the theory of the sausage. While anarchism is a comprehensive doctrine encompassing reflection on society, on the revolution, a theory of knowledge, a theory of the individual, etc., some people, in a given situation, decide to extract from the main body of doctrine and give emphasis to one aspect of the doctrine, naming this new find “anarchism” and deciding that this new slice of sausage is the only way to achieve emancipation. Added to this is undoubtedly a profound ignorance of anarchist texts or authors or, what is worse, a deliberate attempt to falsify them.

Absolutely nothing is found in either in Proudhon or Bakunin, that suggests the slightest temptation to “individualism”: on the contrary, there are very severe criticisms there. We find, however, in the one as in the other, a complete theory of the individual that goes much further than anything we can find in the “anarchist individualists” classics.

The same can be said for insurrectionism. A political movement that aims to create the general conditions for the emancipation of humanity can not hope to apply the same strategy, consistently, in all places and at all times. It can not require all people who adhere to this doctrine to adopt the same practices. We can’t require a person who does not work to be part of a union strategy, for example. We know that at some point we will have to organize to defend the revolution; we must prepare for it. But activists who want to prioritize this type of activity can train themselves, not by bashing the anarchists at the end of the demonstration, but protecting anarchists events involving comrades who have no ability to fight, the children, the elderly, etc.

Bakunin participated in four insurrections in thirty years.¹⁶ He never said that the uprisings were useless, no matter that he said every time that they had no chance of success — which did not prevent him from participating. He just said it was irresponsible, if not criminal, to send people to the slaughter for nothing. And he said that, in any case, the revolution will be the task of the workers gathered in their mass organization with a common ideal, a general idea of their rights and a pretty good idea of the social order they want to build in place of the old order. He said that “a party that, to achieve its ends, that is committed deliberately and systematically to the path of the revolution, is obliged to ensure victory.”¹⁷

¹⁶ I included, in principle, the last, that of Bologna, in which Bakunin took part despite the warnings he had given against the adventurist acts, which, badly prepared and badly organized, became a farce: Bakunin had to flee disguised as a priest carrying a basket of eggs. Tired, sick, and depressed, Bakunin explained his participation in the uprising: “I was determined to die,” he wrote.

¹⁷ “Statism and Anarchy”, Works, Free Field, IV, 404.

When Bakunin said that it is time for “the facts and acts,” he was referring to “the organization of the forces of the proletariat,” which “must be the work of the proletariat itself.”¹⁸

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¹⁸ “Letter to the companions of the Jura Federation,” the first half of October, 1873.

Translator epilogue

The Groupe Salvador Segui has presented good evidence that near the end of his life Bakunin had renounced the irresponsibility and conspiratorial elitism that many so-called ‘insurrectionists’ find so attractive an example. I must confess that this essay has improved my estimation of Bakunin. Whatever his mistakes over his revolutionary career in the end he came to recognize the need for patient organizing rather than conspiratorial ‘theater’. The Bakunin of the Nechayev affair had been taught a stern lesson. Gone were the hopes of a sudden mass explosion that required only the actions of an elite for a trigger. The final Bakunin was much more in the democratic and populist trend of anarchism rather than in the Blanquist-Leninist illusion of a dumb beast who needed an “invisible dictatorship”, as he called it, to think for them.

In any case the tactic of sneaking off into the countryside and performing a drama expecting the population to be suddenly inspired to rise up en masse was exactly as ridiculous as this essay says. Over time as the world became more urbanized and communications improved the absurdity grew. The ridiculous became even more so with time. Of the three Italians mentioned earlier in this series only Malatesta developed a realistic anarchist alternative. In his maturity he became very much a gradualist. Andrea Costa reacted to the magnitude of the insurrectionist mistake by abandoning anarchism for parliamentary socialism. Carlo Cafiero ended his days by dying of TB in an asylum for the mentally ill at the age of 45. He carried his illusions to the end.

In the later half of the 20th century the rural foco tactic was adopted by a variety of Marxist Leninist groups with varying degrees of success, but the window of opportunity closed and it has been decades since there have been any Marxist parties coming to power in this way. The Leninists weren’t as deluded as the early anarchists. They foresaw a protracted guerrilla war rather than a spontaneous insurrection triggered by their example. In a few cases such as FRAC in Colombia and the Naxalites of India the guerillas have lingered on for a half century becoming more and more like simple organized crime rather than revolutionaries.

The unrealistic dream had a lingering presence in Spain where rural isolation was often even more dramatic than in the Italian Mezzogiorno, but for all their romanticism the Spaniards never lost track of the need for the self organization of the people — as the article mentions. The era of Pistolerismo around 1920 wasn’t a survival of insurrectionalism but rather a tit-for-tat battle of assignation between the forces of the Church, government, caciques and capitalists and the unionists of the CNT.

Later, after the formation of the FAI in 1927, the insurrectionist tendency within that organization managed to force the undertaking of a number of utterly quixotic

‘mini-insurrections’ which followed a consistent pattern. A small armed group would enter a town, attack the police station, burn the government documents, tell the population to form committees and abolish money. The utopia never lasted longer than the time it took the Guardia to make their way up the road.

These adventures were less farcical than those of the Italians two generations, but they were nonetheless predictably useless. Their one invariant effect was to fill Spain’s jails with more and more anarchists. By a supreme irony this failure was the one and only thing that contributed to the anarchist-inspired revolution of 1936, admittedly by a very devious path. To understand this we have to look back over the early years of the FAI.

The purpose behind the formation of the FAI was not so much the staging of ‘revolutionary drama’ (or comedy) as it was to ensure that the much larger CNT remained committed to ‘anarchist orthodoxy’. In the beginning, before 1927, this was relatively easy. The main ‘temptation’ was from the increasingly Stalinist communists. The CNT initially considered affiliating to the Moscow controlled ‘Red International of Trade Unions’, but following a report from delegates sent to observe its Congress the CNT overwhelmingly rejected affiliation, and in 1922 elected to join the anarcho-syndicalist AIT. Dissidents such as Joaquín Maurín, once elected as General Secretary of the CNT, left the Confederation but came to oppose Stalinism and later Trotskyism in their own way. In 1935 they formed an anti-Stalinist communist party, the POUM which numbered far more members than the Stalinist PCE and PSUC (the PCE in Catalonia). The POUM, however, was quite creative in finding ways to self-destruct. Between them and the CNT, however, it was obvious that Stalinism suited neither Spanish conditions nor Spanish mentality.

The much more serious ‘threat’ came from those whom the FAI would condemn as “reformists”. The ‘revolutionary exaltation’ of many of the anarchist groups produced opposition on the part of more realistic unionists within the CNT who wanted to concentrate more on bread and butter issues and felt that a strong workers’ organization was more important than ‘poetic fantasies’.

The FAI proved much more effective in packing meetings than in making revolution. As they continued their campaign for ideological purity the reaction of the more moderate CNTistas grew stronger. The FAI continued their campaign of capturing position after position in the Confederation. The matter came to a head at the acrimonious ‘Conservatorio’ CNT convention in Madrid in 1931. While the militants ‘won’ there the moderates responded with the ‘Manifesto of the Thirty’ against what they called the “Leninist-dictatorship of the FAI”.

{An excellent account of these years of factional fighting in the CNT is *Anarchism, the Republic and Civil War in Spain: 1931–1939*}

The gloves were off. The FAI proceeded to depose every moderate union official they could and to expel not just individuals but whole union sections for their moderation. Many sections also left voluntarily. The moderates responded by forming their own

FSL (Libertarian Syndicalist Federation). While the FSL was much smaller than the CNT it was by no means a given that all CNTistas agreed with the stance of the FAI.

The FAI had a free hand, and they misused it to the best of their ability with ill conceived insurrections. The one and only insurrection of this period that had even the remotest chance of success and which offered resistance to the state beyond comic opera was that of Asturias in 1934. The FAI-controlled CNT offered at best lukewarm support to the Asturians. The CNT even refused to call a strike amongst the CNT affiliated railway workers who transported troops to Asturias. The Asturian revolt was inspired by the FAI's rivals amongst the Socialist controlled UGT. On the ground anarchist unionists cooperated fully with their UGT comrades, but not so with the national organization. Not that the socialist controlled UGT was above treachery towards the anarchists, but that is another story.

In the spirit of irony it should be noted that the FAI failed to rise to the occasion at the one time when 'insurrection' was in the real world. A further ironic note is that the CNTistas who cooperated with their UGT *compañeros* in Asturias were generally on the 'moderate' wing of the CNT. While not leaving the CNT they were as one with the dissidents who were expelled or resigned.

The irony reached a peak in 1936. As the defeats accumulated and the prisoners piled up the CNT began to lose membership. From a high of 800,000 in 1931 it shrank to 300,000 in early 1936. Those who remained in the CNT grew increasingly critical of the putschist tactics of the FAI. New elections were due in February 1936, and the CNT was under increasing pressure to abandon its anti-electoral tradition. A left wing 'Popular Front' coalition was set to replace the right wing government. Here is the supreme irony. The large number of prisoners was the most compelling arguments in favor of a switch away from anti-electoralism because it was believed that a Popular Front government would release them. The prisoners were there because of the FAI's failed insurrections.

In the end a masterful act of face-saving was decided upon. The CNT was to have nothing to say about the elections. The FAI ran a half-hearted don't vote campaign, very toned down from their usual vehemence. The Popular Front won the election. CNT membership began to grow again.

In May 1936 at the Congress of Zaragoza the CNT engaged in a public self-criticism of the insurrectionary fever of the preceding years. The ultras were duly chastised. This Congress also saw the readmission of the Treintista led syndicates of the FSL with the notable exception of Angel Pestaña who had really and truly had enough. He went on to try and form the 'Syndicalist Party', a strange hybrid of anarchism and politics. It never gained traction.

On July 17, 1936 the Spanish army attempted a coup to remove the Popular Front from power. It succeeded in half of Spain, but in the other half it was defeated by a real popular insurrection. The dreams of the insurrectionists had come true, but only because of their defeats, both military and politically in the CNT. Needless to say this wasn't what the dreamers had imagined.

The Spanish Revolution had begun, a revolution that was arguably the most radical, thoroughgoing and popular in history. The result, after 3 years of heroic struggle, was defeat, but anarchism had its brightest moment. When a goodly portion of the Catalan population made their sad way north to the French border in 1939 they left behind the insurrectionist delusion, forever buried on Spanish soil.

Never again would ‘insurrectionism’, as originally conceived by the Italian anarchists appear on the world scene. Guerilla wars would be fought during the rest of the century, based in rural areas and led by Leninist/Stalinist parties, but these were far from being the popular insurrections that the 19th century dreamers imagined they could inspire.

A bit to the north, however, in France and to a lesser degree in Italy ‘insurrectionism’ began to take on a much more sinister meaning, one divorced from the idealistic and populist dreams of its first adherents. This new ‘insurrectionism’ that actually abandoned the idea of popular insurrection out of arrogant contempt for ‘the masses’ is what modern day ‘insurrectionism’ grew out of rather than the dreams of the Italians and the Spaniards who never divorced themselves from the people. This is as good a time as any to pause before going on with the story.

The Ted K Archive

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