New York anarchist Bob McGlynn died of a heart attack on the 23rd of August 2016 at the age of sixty. He was involved in many struggles: Anti-nuclear agitation, the first bike messengers’ union in New York and ‘and fighting riot kkkops in Tompkins Square with the rest of us during riot days from 1988-1991.’[1]

The anti-nuclear stuff led to building links with activists inside what was then the ‘Soviet Bloc’ (as well as getting arrested in Moscow), led on to worldwide solidarity efforts with Neither East Nor West. In a recently published history of NENW-NYC, he described it as a ‘de facto Anarchist Black Cross section.’ [2]

Bill Weinberg’s obituary in The Villager ends with the words ‘He will be remembered for his boundless love of freedom, and intransigent hostility to all dictatorships and superpowers.’ [3]

Syndicalist on Libcom.org paid him this tribute: ‘Bob and our NY comrades go back to the late 1970s… from bike messengers, to east-west stuff, the Awareness League, so many other campaigns and good times. A hard drinker and wild at that in his prime, but you would not have found a more dedicated soul… both to the movement and those he had a special relationship with.

‘Dear friend, comrade, I never would’ve thought it would come to such a short end. You fought your demons, your demons fought you. You fought the good fight for freedom, be it in the capitalist world or the so-called “communist”. You were such a nutter at times, but no one could every question your sincerity, your heart and funny ass soul. Time may not have always been good, but brother, you were “there” in so many ways. Big hug comrade, many tears to shed, many good memories to recall and write about, but the fight will go on, just as you would wish.

‘Those of us who knew you well will miss you in ways that go beyond words. Until we are on the same side of the barricade again… Bob McGlynn… PRESENTE!’ [4]

Our thoughts go out to his family, friends and comrades.

Notes
1, Chris Flash of The Shadow

Greetings compañero for you are going
We are losing a generation of hope and action, tragic and divine fools with insanity of well being for everyone else.

Forgers of libertarian socialism, justice and liberty people that embraced the hard road of a generous idea,

That planted in the stars
a new world for our hearts.

You will no longer have to share, with your cell compañeros
the beatings from the guards.

Greetings compañero for you are going
I shall not cry your parting, for more will come to join the fight.

If you no longer sing, others will sing.

Greetings, noble compañero, to whom neither time, nor suffering has changed.
Should your heart no longer pulsate, other libertarian hearts will.

by Bernabé García Polanco
Translated from the Spanish by Vicente Ruiz (hijo) (from Salud, Compañero Que Te Vas)

Originally printed in A Brief History of the Spanish Anarchist Refugees and Immigrants in Australia, edited and compiled by Francisco Soler with the co-operation of Grupo Cultural de Estudios Sociales de Melbourne (2012). Read it online at:
http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/fttg8w

Inside: Anarchist book review special
The dossier of subject no.1218 : a Bulgarian anarchist’s story by Alexander Nakov [Review]

Alexander Nakov is a veteran of the Bulgarian anarchist movement. The ‘dossier’ of the title is the report on him from the secret police. It’s one of those police reports that anarchist historians love: ‘He has all the working class virtues except loyalty to the Party’ is the subtext! Born in 1919, Nakov can claim to have got his secondary education in fascist prisons and his higher education in Bolshevik ones. Nakov (along with the bulk of Bulgaria’s anarchist movement) is an anarchist communist: communist as in ‘From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs’. He uses ‘Bolshevik’ for statist ‘Everything for the party’, big-C Communism.

Despite everything, Nakov comes across as a very modest person. Like most anarchist autobiographers, he’s driven to use this opportunity to record the names and fates of his comrades. He’s had a full life, but isn’t interested in making himself a hero. For example, the most memorable part of his time with the partisans at the end of the second world war is him telling his friend, Pencho Raikov, ‘never to volunteer for actions as he had not done military service.’ (p26)

If you’re interested in anarchist history, you’ll find this a fascinating read. We should all be grateful to those who’ve put the hard work into making this English edition happen: Mariya Radeva for her translation, Rob Blow for the editorial work, Nick Heath for his historical introduction and Black Cat Press for printing and publishing it. Rescuing a movement from historical oblivion is no small job, so get a copy.

If I was going to write a short review, I’d end here by agreeing with Rob Blow that Alexander Nakov is ‘an inspiration and shining example’ (p.xvii) but I’d like to go on a bit more. This book is valuable for showing the Bulgarian movement in context as it appeared to a protagonist. For example, the Esperanto and temperance movements were strongly connected with Bulgarian anarchism under both the fascist and bolshevik regimes, and also offered a place of retreat in times of repression. We need to remember that anarchist movements look different under different conditions.

This is a very human and down-to-earth book – literally in this great example of mutual aid. When Nakov comes out of the punishment cells in the Bolshevik concentration camp of Belene, ‘The comrades greeted me with food, but when we went to hoe the sunflowers, I was unable to keep hold of the hoe. I survived thanks solely to the mutual aid among us anarchists, which has always been not only a simple human principle but a well-organized practice. One comrade stood on my right side, another stood on my left, and as they hoed their lines, they hoed mine too.’ (p52)

I also enjoyed his account of working in a railway repair workshop: they have to have skilled workers get anything done, but Nakov is an anarchist serving a term of exile. Says the manager: ‘It’s as if you’ve fallen from the sky. So, I’ll give you work but it will have to be off the books because you are prohibited.’ Then, Nakov has to be put right by the workers that if he increases the estimate of how long each job will take, they’ll not be scrabbling quite so hard for their daily bread... (p71, 72-3). I think anyone who’s ever worked might find those solutions familiar.

The funniest part (which is also very illuminating) is in an appendix about Nakov’s home village. Stanko is the Party-appointed Mayor (and tax collector) who’s not universally loved. He goes off to Sofia for an operation, and someone gets their revenge by sending a telegram claiming he’s died. Off go the Regional Committee to bring the body home, but they end up having to bring the living Stanko back so that the funeral preparations can be cancelled. ‘While the villagers thought that Stanko had died, they made merry all night in the pubs. The next day, when they discovered he had not actually died, they drank all night, but this time from sorrow.’ (p132).

These ordinary moments illuminate how the anarchist movement worked – and connected with other people. Nakov is also able to reflect critically on his own motivation, recognising that ‘the excitement of youth, revolutionary romanticism and the impulse towards giving and receiving support and solidarity’ (p1) started him on his life in the anarchist movement seventy years ago.

The dossier of subject no.1218 bring Nakov’s (and Bulgarian anarchism’s) story up to date with the return of the movement after 1990. The path is not always smooth, of course, but it gives you food for thought about how different generations of anarchists work together.

The final word should go to Alexander Nakov himself, defining the political idea that has guided his life:

‘Is anarchism the resistance of the free human being against any form of dictatorship? Is anarchism the defence of the idea of brotherhood, justice, mutual aid and human dignity? Yes, this is anarchism. That is why anarchism will always, even in our money-conscious times, have its followers.’ (p95)

The dossier of subject no.1218 : a Bulgarian anarchist’s story by Alexander Nakov, translated by Mariya Radeva, edited by Rob Blow, foreword by Nick Heath
Review Special: Louise Michel

Graphic dreams of Utopia [Book review of The Red Virgin and the Vision of Utopia]
The Talbots, writer and academic Mary and illustrator Bryan, have lovingly researched and created this graphic novel of the story of anarchist militant Louise Michel, her role in the Paris Commune of 1871 and her support of the indigenous peoples of the penal colony where she was exiled. It’s impeccably sourced, readable, decently drawn, and a pleasing book to hold. So why is my welcome a tiny bit cautious?

For a start, the format itself has become problematical. Bookshops shelve all graphic novels together, from satirical heavyweights to Marvel, branding them indiscriminately as yet another form of genre fiction. And this fictionalising tendency is a worry. Is a graphic novel actually the most effective way to present Louise Michel’s life?

Her story is inspirational, of course. But the practical and political issues with which the Commune struggled are fairly quickly bypassed here, to allow room for repeated emphasis on the Utopian elements of her teaching and writing, and her interest in scientific fiction, with references to H G Wells, Jules Verne, Bulwer Lytton and so on. What’s celebrated here is a persistent but delusive myth, a kind of mystical modernism, in which advanced technologies will inevitably bring about a perfect society and the realisation of social justice. In reality, those technologies have made modern capitalism so complex that it now appears almost impossible to disentangle or supplant.

Through the 19th century the idea of Utopia moved from its origins in political discourse into science fiction and fantasy. Once fictionalised, it became positioned as a distant world, outside reality. So that the comic book / graphic novel, that game reserve of the desirable but unreal, is just the right place for the preservation and celebration of a perfect society – but as a permanent impossibility, as an admission of defeat. (No such problems in realising Dystopia, by the way. It’s here already, it’s called 21st century capitalism, and we have to bloody live in it.)

Utopianism is a flaw that has run historically through much anarchist thinking. The real issue is how to change things – something, anything – in the here and now. In its Utopian dreaming anarchism slides away from the realm of the possible, ultimately declining to a sub-category of steampunk culture. At that point the “A” on the flag will stand for little more than Academia and Archiving.

But back to the book. Bryan Talbot’s drawing here, though technically accomplished, is hardly experimental or playful, but it serves well enough as a sturdy vehicle for the narrative. For me all the dark grey gets a bit relentless, and his handling in this book lacks some of the virtuosity of his other work, where it can be freed up by more fantastic content.

Mary Talbot flashbacks the Louise Michel narrative to and fro from imagined conversations with American feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who pushes on the story by voicing the reader’s questions, a slightly disjointed narrative device. The Gilman figure is more than the author disguised as a Victorian, but she does at one point vow to write fiction “because it’s food for the mind. I mean it can do a lot of cultural work. You know, the potential for changing minds.” A neat justification for graphic novels?

The whole Michel story is bookended, a little oddly, by the story of Franz Reichelt, a parachute inventor who jumped to his death from the Eiffel Tower in 1912 while testing a prototype. (Don’t try it at home, kids.) Is Reichelt included as an enduring image of the indomitable optimism of the progressive personality, in the spirit of Louise Michel? As the opening quote from Samuel Beckett says, “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” OK, though Reichelt’s fall could equally well serve as a cautionary fable of the wishful thinking of scientific optimism.

But these are minor points, and there is plenty here that is positive and informative. It’s remarkable just how many (real) women play important roles in the narrative. And Michel’s involvement with the rebellion of the tribal peoples of New Caledonia well deserves the space it’s given. So The Red Virgin earns qualified applause, if only as an introduction to Michel’s story. There’s plenty of other stuff out there, with many of Michel’s own writings in French free to Kindle, if you can manage French, and some sources in English to be had very cheaply. Meanwhile The Red Virgin should find a ready readership, and hopefully not just within the ghetto culture of comix fandom.

Richard Warren

The Red Virgin and the Vision of Utopia
Mary M. Talbot and Bryan Talbot
Jonathan Cape, 2016 ISBN 9780224102346
Ruth Kinna “Kropotkin: Reviewing The Classical Anarchist Tradition” [Book review].

I have watched hurling a few times in my life. There’s lot’s of action and lots of passion but the bottom line is that for most of the time I have no idea what is going on. I really don’t. I am aware that a lot of people do, just like lots of people understand and enjoy netball. I feel somewhat similar when I read a work like this. It’s really well researched and Ruth Kinna uses her material in a shrewd and sensitive way. There’s seriousness here and respect for the sources and ideas she is working with, yet for large sections of the text, I am not really sure what is happening, or why it’s happening. I rather think the fault may be in me rather than in Kinna and I say that not from, I hope, a position of false humility or some type of sneering anti-intellectualism.

Kinna’s aim is to rescue Kropotkin from the framework of classical anarchism and counter his marginalization in modern political theory. She discusses three different eras of anarchism – classical anarchism, new anarchism and post-anarchism, all of which appear to be accepted currency in current anarchist theoretical writing. Apart from being a handy tool for political theorists/philosophers, I do struggle to see the point of them. So much so that I wonder whether these constructs obfuscate more than they clarify. They smooth down the edges of anarchist development into boxes as writers push and squeeze anarchism into them. Much of the complexity in the struggle to create anarchy is taken away and patterns are identified that may not really have been there – or not have been as prominent as they appear from this type of rough categorization. More importantly they make anarchist static. In fact in its practice I sense anarchism has been agile and multi-faceted and you can find examples of these three constructs everywhere and at any time.

Let’s just take a few examples by considering one of these constructs. Discussing “new anarchism” the author writes “An abiding theme in the significant current of new anarchist writing was the principle of evolutionary change” (19) and “opposition to the state was understood primarily in counter-cultural terms” (19). All this begs questions. There appears to be no room for personal experience in this type of argument or counter-argument – but I would mention that I became an anarchist in this time period (1960s/70s) and I can safely say that most of the people I worked with believed in the necessity of abrupt and sudden revolutionary change. Change certainly wasn’t inevitable and it would need to be made. Nor did we particularly see gradualism (sometimes a result of a belief in evolutionary change) as offering anything but minor relief. I remember some comrades suggesting how it was all too easy for a gradualist struggle to become an end it itself. On reflection I think they may have been more correct than I realized at the time. That said I realize that in this particular context personal experience is irrelevant.

Now this “abiding theme” in new anarchism, as Nicholas Walter mentions, was not new. For a period of time (1909-1916) the anarchist group around Mother Earth felt they were riding the wave of the new as they embraced new literature and ideas from Europe that, to them, indicated the inevitability of the social revolution. As Emma Goldman described it they were the “avant-garde”. At other times they celebrated the acts of attenateurs like Gaetano Bresci and Berkman himself, seeing them as a revolutionary spark. A sense of evolutionary hopefulness often permeated the work of the sex radicals around the American anarchist newspaper Lucifer (1883-1907 – slap bang in the classical period !!!). As I suggested earlier these blowzy constructs appear to ignore how anarchism changes according to circumstances and how anarchists can rather nimbly adapt to those changes. My point is that there are ebbs and flows in the activities and thoughts of many anarchists and their practice over a lifetime that lead to changes of emphasis and direction and these changes add a richness and complexity in our attempts both to understand anarchism and create anarchy. What looks socially and culturally inevitable one year doesn’t the next.

I am not quite sure what the phrase “counter-cultural” means when talking about “new anarchism”. I am presuming that it means creating and maintaining a radical culture that challenges dominant ideologies and, I guess, offers a home where like-minded comrades can meet and reflect. If I am anywhere near correct wasn’t that what the Chicago anarchists did in the 1880s (eighty years before “new anarchism”) with their drama clubs, their concerts and their picnics – never mind their rather evolutionary industrial activities as they worked towards social revolution? How many reading groups have there been in our history as people came together to read Bakunin, Goldman, Kropotkin, Proudhon? How many reading groups that brought an anarchist sensibility to Shelley, to Strindberg and mainstream literature in general? When Vanzetti and other Galleanisti read Dante in the early twentieth century weren’t they creating their own counter culture that was as rich as it was life affirming? They had their own ways of seeing that made them who they were. It fuelled their war on the State and gave them a sense of who they could be in companionship with others. Are we saying that in the “new anarchism” being counter cultural was enough to change balances of power? To be fair Kinna is keen to stress the “myth” of classical anarchism and writes “what remains of classical anarchism if one of it’s chief exponents turns out to be something other than the model allows?” and her approach, if I have
understood it correctly, does appear to open all sorts of exciting and useful doors in our pursuit of understanding just what anarchism was and is.

We also need to remember that Kropotkin was quite capable of contradicting himself. On p125 Kinna writes that “Kropotkin attempted to convince his middle-class audience that their cherished values properly supported anarchist conclusions”. Yes he did – but he could also write to Emma Goldman in December 1903 critiquing her attempts to work with the New York radical middle-class in the re-invigorated Free Speech League: “I really do not understand dearest Emma what sort of letter could I write to support the agitation that is carried on by believers in the Constitution” (Letter to Emma Goldman, December 10, 1903). No-one is trying to be clever here. He may well have changed his mind later (I don’t know if he did). It’s just another example of just how difficult I find writing on anarchism is and how all our generalizations and understandings need to be taken with a good fistful of salt.

The discussion on nihilism and Kropotkin will have much to offer the reader. Kropotkin prioritized Turgenev’s Fathers and Sons and Chernyshevsky’s What Is To Be Done? in his attempts to explain the influence of nihilism on women’s liberation in Russia. Certainly the latter novel played no small part in Emma Goldman’s and Alexander Berkman’s political development. Living in a commune first in New York, then New Haven, Goldman imagined herself as Vera Pavlova – the central woman protagonist of Chernyshevsky’s novel. Berkman identified with another of the novel’s characters – Rakhmetov, the revolutionary whose sole aim was to bring about revolution. There could be no joy or love or comfort in the life of a revolutionary Rakhmetov suggests. All that matters is the revolution. The night before he attempted to assassinate Henry Clay Frick in July 1892 Berkman signed himself into a Pittsburgh hotel as Mr Rakhmetov.

When Kropotkin supported the allies in World War 1 Malatesta wrote to the London anarchist newspaper Freedom in December 1914 criticizing Kropotkin’s action and mentioning his “anti-German prejudices.” I have always been a little puzzled by that and Kinna explains it clearly and in detail suggesting that Kropotkin’s action in supporting the allies was consistent with his analysis of European history. It’s a fascinating and well supported argument. I am less convinced by her suggesting that he “supported the campaign against Germany as an anti-militarist and anti-coloniser”, as I am unable to believe he could ignore the reprehensible actions of the British and French in their colonies. That said she has opened an important seam here, which we would do well to mine a little more.

After all this I still can’t shake off the feeling that sometimes I don’t really know what’s going on in the book. I am not quite sure if the anarchism I am reading about is what I understand anarchism to be. Nobody could gainsay the importance of Kropotkin in how anarchism was and is made. Thousands upon thousands of anarchists read his work and found it made sense. Sometimes it simply affirmed what they were already thinking. Sometimes it must have been a bolt from the blue. Whatever the response, some kind of dialogue between them and Kropotkin’s words helped make anarchism – and the anarchism many of them made was inclusive and open as anything could be. As Kinna notes, he didn’t want to make anarchists; he wanted to make a world where anarchism could exist. That idea may well demand a closer examination than it has had.

I suppose that Kropotkin is the gift that keeps on giving. His writing is easy to read and has the ability to explain complex ideas (and there are lots of them there) in a clear and straightforward way although, as Kinna suggests, his personality is commented on as much as his writing. Reactions to who he appeared to be and to his written work differed even in his lifetime among anarchists. In the December 1912 Mother Earth which was a celebration of his seventieth birthday, Harry Kelly saw him as “An inspiration and guiding star for men and women of all lands, his influence will grow and expand”. For Emma Goldman it is Kropotkin’s attitude to the anarchists who adopt assassination and armed struggle that is worthy of mention “Never once in all his revolutionary career has our comrade passed judgment on those whom most so-called revolutionists had only too willingly shaken off – partly because of ignorance and partly because of cowardice – those who had committed political acts of violence”.

I suppose the debates and interpretations about his work can go on forever and perhaps they should. An important question we might want to consider, though, is where they could take place and how they were (and are) approached. On a final note the book is ridiculously expensive. The price is pre-selecting publishers to bring out a paperback version. There’s another audience waiting out there and there may well be much more discussion to be had where this text could play an important role.

Barry Pateman

News books on Anarchist history

Library (book) news (October 2016)

We have two books co-published with AK Press, and another on the way. The first one out is the first English translation of Osvaldo Bayer’s *Rebellion in Patagonia*. It’s a tragic account of how the workers of Patagonia revolted against the landlords – and were crushed.

*Rebellion in Patagonia*’s reviewed on our website:

‘Tragic though it is, *Rebellion in Patagonia* is written with style as well as heart:

“we can imagine those two tiny Fords traveling through the desert, carrying eight madmen drunk on the ideas of social justice and human redemption. What possessed three Spaniards, one Pole, one Argentine, and three Chileans to set off through this wasteland to bring the gospel of Bakunin to those illiterate, God-forsaken peons? They were crazier than any characters dreamed of by Roberto Arlt, beyond the imagination of even Maxim Gorky. A former stagehand, a stevedore, a mechanic, a former telegraph operator, three shepherds, a former electrician, and a hotel valet go off to fight for social justice and human redemption in the depopulated expanses of Patagonia. A shame that the conversations between these eight messengers of dynamite and fury weren’t recorded. If Jesus had happened upon them in the desert, he would have shook his head sadly and told them, ‘Brothers, you are exaggerating the teachings of the Gospel.’”’

(p156-7)

‘Bayer’s book is a memorial to them: “flowers for the rebels who failed” as anarchists like to say, a tribute based not on a sense of nostalgia but a love of freedom. It’s also a reminder that the past is important: how can we change things if we don’t understand how we got where we now are?’ [1]

ISBN: 9781849352215; 506 pages
https://www.akpress.org/rebellion-in-patagonia.html

The Albert Memorial

Albert Meltzer was one of the most notable and influential figures in the British anarchist movement of the second half of the 20th century. From a schoolboy supporter of the Spanish Revolution, he was a committed anarchist militant for the rest of his days, involved in restarting the Anarchist Black Cross and helping to found the Kate Sharpley Library. His many books include *The Floodgates of Anarchy* (with Stuart Christie), *Anarchism: Arguments For and Against*, and his autobiography *I Couldn’t Paint Golden Angels*.

This second edition is expanded with further essays, including Albert’s first and final articles.

https://www.akpress.org/the-albert-memorial.html

Coming Soon: Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist by Alexander Berkman (First annotated edition)

In 1892, Alexander Berkman tried to assassinate Henry Clay Frick for the latter’s role in violently suppressing the Homestead Steel Strike. Berkman’s attempt was unsuccessful. He spent the next fourteen years in Pennsylvania’s Western Penitentiary. Upon release, he wrote what was to become a classic of prison literature, and a profound testament to human courage in the face of oppression.

This new edition of his account of those years is introduced and fully annotated by Barry Pateman and Jessica Moran, both former associate editors of the Emma Goldman Papers at the University of California, Berkeley. Their efforts make this the definitive version of Berkman’s tale of his transformation within prison, his growing sympathy for those he’d considered social parasites, and the intimate relationships he developed with them. Also includes never-before- published facsimile reprints and transcriptions of the diary Berkman kept while he wrote this book, conveying the difficulties he had reliving his experiences.

See:
www.akpress.org/prisonmemoirsofanarchist.html

Notes
KSL: Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library
ISSN 1475-0309

Subscription rates for one year (4 issues) are:

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- UK: £5
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- USA: $10
- Americas/Row: $20

Institutions: £20

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