On the Trail of the Anarchist Movement in East Germany

David Bernardini

"We are not convinced that the anarchists are authentic enemies of Marxism" – Stalin

Anarchists in East Germany, in the famous German Democratic Republic (GDR)? Up until a couple of weeks ago, to be truthful, I knew nothing about that. Now, books on the subject are scattered across my writing desk and I can state: yes, indeed, "believe me, they were there" as Leo Ferré used to sing. In this piece, I shall try to provide a brief outline of the ups and downs of the anarchist movement inside the GDR.

The completest text I have found [in Italian] on the subject is a translation of something written way back in 1980 and published in France by a former anarchist militant, Jean Barrué, in the Parisian review *Iztok*. In addition, I have unearthed a 2009 novel written by two French authors, Jean-Marc Gonin and Olivier Guez, shrewdly published to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. It recounts the tales of various characters operating mostly in East Berlin and in Leipzig between October and November 1989. Among them is a certain Hansi, a young, idealistic anarchist described as "all Bakunin and Mühsam". Obviously, we meet Hansi in jail, where he has for a cell-mate a Nazi who threatens to kill him. In short, the anarchist's normal run of luck.

Furthermore, in East Germany the libertarian movement certainly did not have an easy time of it. Its history can be roughly divided into two stages:

First stage: 1945-1952, and

Stage two: 1986-1990

From defeat to defeat (1945-1952)

The Germany that emerged from the Second World War was a heap of rubble, in material and figurative terms. The United States, France, Britain and the Soviet Union had divided the country up into four occupied zones. Located right in the heart of the soviet sector, Berlin itself was similarly divided. 1945 was a watershed year and the Soviet Union did not as yet have a clearly identified German policy and those wanting to resume political activity enjoyed a few months of relative tolerance. Still, the anarchist movement's circumstances were dramatic: Nazi rule and the war had put paid to virtually all organisational activity, male and female activists emerging from clandestinity, prison or the concentration camps or returning from exile were exhausted, so much so that lots of them decided to retreat into private life. The leading exponents of the movement from the days of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) were abroad and what few groups managed to re-form found themselves isolated from one another and had to grapple with huge material difficulties. Hunger and unemployment persisted and right from the outset the victorious powers showed little disposition to favour anything but the main parties, whilst inside the movement, unresolved polemics dating back more than a decade flared up once more.

20 May 1945 saw the publication in Hamburg of the very first edition of *Mahnruf*, [Warning cry] a cyclostyled and typewritten newspaper promoted by the anarchist **Otto Reimers** (1902-1984). Two years later, in West Germany, significant papers such as **Willy Huppertz**'s (1904-1978) *Befreiung* (Liberation) and *Die Internazionale* (The International) appeared, only to be replaced in 1949 by the monthly *Die Freie Gesellschaft* (Free Society) monthly, the mouthpiece of the

Föderation Freiheitlicher Sozialisten (Libertarian Social Federation), an organisation launched in May 1947 and several hundred members strong.

In the sector occupied by the Red Army, however, the anarchists' circumstances were more complicated, for two reasons. On the one hand, they needed to pay heed to the great upheavals in international politics and the implications for individual countries. As far as collaboration between the United States and the Soviet Union was concerned, Germany proved to be one of the main theatres of friction. In 1946, Stalin announced that war between the communist and the capitalist systems was inevitable; that April, in the soviet-occupied zone of Germany, the Communist Party amalgamated with the Social Democratic Party to form the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Unified Socialist Party of Germany), or SED, whilst a process of enforced sovietisation got under way, designed to arrive at the formation of an East German state separate from the rest of Germany. Events moved quickly over the ensuing months. In March 1947, the Truman Doctrine was proclaimed, three months after that came the Marshall Plan, with the Soviet Union replying in September with the formation of the Cominform, a sort of re-branded Third International on a smaller scale. After the ending of the Berlin Blockade (June 1948-May 1949), Germany found herself split into a Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and a German Democratic Republic (GDR). Then again, the stance of the anarchists in East Germany was rather problematic and was the focus of lots of criticisms, coming mainly from those of their comrades who had stayed in the western zone. In his 1947 pamphlet *Zur Betrachtung der Lage in Deutschland* (Thoughts on Germany's Condition), **Rudolf Rocker** criticised the decision of those militants to join a political party, albeit that he realised that they had done so more for human motives than political ones.

"Lots of comrades who, after the war, were unable any longer to find any opening for activities of their own, are today seeking a haven in other organisations in order to assert their beliefs. But the range of like-minded organizations is not great, so some of them have decided to join one or other of the two socialist parties [...] It is entirely plain to me that no further sacrifice can be asked of men who were cut off for so long from the whole world and had to endure such horrific things [...] So I understand very well that some of them [have] made a virtue of necessity [...] [Yet] I do not think that our comrades can actually carry out profitable activity under the auspices of the old parties."

The following year, a report from the Internationale ArbeiterInnen Assoziation (IIA) [International Working Men's and -Women's Association], entitled *Die Lage in Ostdeutschland* [The Situation in East Germany] denounced the SED's monopoly on political power and the militarisation of the society and economy under way in the eastern sector. Furthermore, it argued:

"There is no substantial group of libertarian socialists. Lots of comrades with a history in the old anarcho-syndicalist FAUD are working with the SED, in the erroneous belief that they might preserve the heritage of libertarian socialism through such collaboration, until better times come."

Between the beginning of 1946 and 1948, Eastern Germany witnessed an ongoing shutting down of any scope for political activity on the part of the anarchist movement. Indeed, the SED in 1947 announced a struggle against all "deviationists, left and right" and two years after that it announced a systematic purge of its own ranks. In the face of this onslaught, male and female libertarian activists found themselves divided, and largely impotent to boot. The historian Hans Jürgen Degen has written that there were three main identifiable tendencies within the behaviour of the anarchists in East Germany. In fact, lots of militants made up their minds to collaborate with the communist regime, for a range of very different motives and in very different ways.

One pretty substantial group of militants entered into pacts with the new establishment, whilst attempting to use it to libertarian ends. Degen argues that this was a dangerous "balancing act".

"On the one hand, they entered and worked with the SED and with the organisations it led; on the other there were informal meetings between anarchists"

That was the course chosen by the Dresden anarchists. In a letter to Helmut Rüdiger (1903-1966), the one-time FAUD anarcho-syndicalist **Oskar Kohl** (1867-1954) explained in 1947 that:

"[If in fact] we stay on the outside, then we look indifferent and have absolutely no forum in which we can express ourselves. Even if we cannot alter the course, then let us at least preserve our acquaintanceship, at least insofar as we are functionaries (and many of us are) and can bring more influence to bear on small things than just one person."

In his letter, Kohl therefore stressed that the chief threat to the anarchists in East Germany was isolation. Joining the regime's organisations was just a tactical move by means of which they might have the possibility of acting and, albeit covertly, spreading their ideas and building up networks of contacts and sympathisers, until such time as things might look up. It was a difficult choice and not merely because of the dangers of repression. As Kohl himself was to note a few weeks later, some ex-anarchists had become "tall poppies" in the regime, showing that they had fitted in only too well.

On the other hand, probably only a small fraction of libertarian activists bought into the SED completely and consciously. Take **Rudolf Michaelis** (1907-1990), one-time anarchist who fought in Spain; he joined the SED and secured the post of administrative director of the State Museum in Berlin. Michaelis explained his choice away by comparing himself to a "little peasant", toiling away to leave a libertarian impression.

These two approaches, between which the dividing lines seem, in some cases, to have been rather subtle, differed starkly from the third approach which Degen identifies with the person of **Willi Jelinek** (1890-1952); Jelinek decided instead to reject the communist regime in its totality and to promote autonomous organisation by anarchists. Jelinek was a metal-mechanic from Zwickau (Saxony) and during the Weimar Republic he had been part of the team around the newspaper *Proletarischer Zeitgeist* (1922-1933) and with the passage of time he had moved across from councilist positions to anarchism. When the war finished, Jelinek used the list of old *Proletarischer Zeitgeist* subscribers to re-establish contact with surviving militants. This also brought him into contact with exponents active in western and eastern Germany alike, people such as Otto Reimers and Willy Huppertz. Thanks to help from other anarchists in the zone, Jelinek launched and distributed documents and flyers despite a chronic shortage of paper and harsh repression by the authorities. As the months passed, five or six groups were formed in Saxony, whilst there were the first inklings of organisation also in Thuringia. Elected chair of the factory council with a 95% share of the votes in the factory where he worked, Jelinek stepped up his trade union activity outside Zwickau as well, but without joining the SED. His aim was clear: promotion of an anarchist movement that might offer the alternative of a libertarian society. Jelinek's drive very soon began to worry the communist authorities who managed to plant spies within his circle. In November 1948, a conference was held in Leipzig between all the libertarian groups present within the soviet occupied zone, its aim being to coordinate, just as had been done in the western part of Germany. But the police arrested all of the participants, spies included. Jelinek was imprisoned in Dresden and was then moved to Bautzen prison where he was to take part in a revolt against the awful prison conditions. He would die in 1952 in circumstances which are unclear but probably from "wasting away" as a fellow detainee was later to state.

In September 1947, alluding to the "comrades from the eastern zone", Rüdiger wrote:

"I fear many of them may come to a bad end."

His forecast was correct and that was what the three approaches adopted by the anarchists in East Germany (as listed by Degen) had in common. In fact, the repression came down hard even on those whose affiliation to the SED was more or less sincere. Michaelis was dismissed from his directorship in 1949 and in 1951 was expelled from the SED for his "anarcho-syndicalist tendencies".

Over the course of 1949 two huge waves of arrests zeroed in on anti-stalinist militants, anarchists included. *Befreiung* and the FFS threw themselves into solidarity efforts, sending packages and sums of money to the families of those arrested and swallowed up by the East German prison system. In fact, it was plain to the libertarian activists in the FRG just how dramatic the situation was. In March 1949, for instance, the FFS urged its members not to send written matter to East Germany since "any letter might pose a danger to the safety of our local friends". In 1950, *Befreiung* contended that there were thirty anarchists locked up in Sachsenhausen, the still operational concentration camp where the Nazis had murdered Erich Mühsam in 1934. On this score, in 1949 Rocker issued an appeal for the release of Mühsam's partner **Zensl Elfinger**, unaccountably being held by the soviet authorities and a "symbol of defamed humanity". The "outcry" that Rocker was hoping for never came and for many years a leaden curtain fell on the GDR.

Scramble for the exit (1986-1990)

Over the next twenty years, the anarchist presence in the GDR is barely discernible and did not go beyond the odd illegal flyer or some text smuggled around the GDR. The German communist authorities in fact closely monitored political activity outside of the organisations tied to the state; the media was overseen from on high and press freedom was afforded only to an SED-connected elite. Yet there was something going on in the interstices of a society which only gave the appearance of inactivity. Come the 1960s, a few glimmers of light appeared: in student and youth circles the seeds of a counter-culture sprouted and the first "long-hairs" popped up, oddly enough in places that the GDR had set aside for its official events, places like Alexanderplatz or the Karl-Marx Allee. Rock bands like *Freygang* showed clear libertarian influences and spread a message that made some sort of an impact in youth circles. Set up in 1971 and inspired by FRG anarchist group *Ton Steine Scherben*, *Freygang* found their recording licence withdrawn by the East Berlin authorities between 1983 and 1985. As the 1970s drew to a close, punk put in an appearance and with it the first cyclostyled punkzines surfaced. The sub-culture that was emerging was not politicised like its counterpart in western Europe, but as the libertarian researcher Bernd Drücke has argued, in the GDR the very existence of a sub-culture was a political milestone.

In the meantime, out from the shadows of the protestant church stepped a movement of opposition to the regime. Erhardt Neubert, a human rights activist turned author of several studies of the resistance in East Germany, has stressed the crucial as well as ambiguous part played by the Church, as it offered, on the one hand, a measure of protection for dissidents and acted as go-between in dealings with the authorities, and on the other a structure that promoted a sort of a pre-emptive muzzling as it disciplined its most critical members because it feared hurting its good relations with the regime. Today it is no mystery that many Church officials had dealings with the Stasi; take Manfred Stolpe, who by the late 1990s was a prominent exponent of the Social Democratic Party.

In 1978, SED secretary and president of the GDR's Council of State, Erich Honecker, granted the East Berlin protestant bishop Albrecht Schönherr leave to publish an internal church press. This was the first opening-up of the regime's repressive practices and after it the opposition kept

pushing the boundaries. In the meantime, the first political active anarchist groups had emerged, groups like the *Anarchistischer Arbeitskreis Wolfspelz* (AAW) in Dresden which had emerged from church circles in 1982. The AAW owed its name to a local bishop who on one occasion had described the people who went on to become its members as "wolves in sheep's clothing". The group became known right across the GDR for its publishing ability and it circulated thousands of flyers thanks to assistance from the presses of a local newspaper. Furthermore, by the 1980s some of the writings of Emma Goldman, Bakunin and Kropotkin were in circulation. In the autumn of 1986, there was a development with the appearance of the first issue of *Umweltblätter* [Environment Pages], a type-written, cyclostyled libertarian monthly with a print run of some hundreds of copies; it was published by the Umwelt-Bibliothek [Environmental Library] in East Berlin which in turn was housed in the cellar of the parochial house of the Church of Zion. The paper dealt with day to day life in the GDR, travel (a particularly sensitive issue at the time), ecology, anarchism and social movements. That same year an atheist group was formed that described itself as *Kirche von Unten* (KVU) [Church From Below] and it was made up mostly of anarchist activists and punks. This group published three issues of *mOAning- STAR.* In the winter of 1986-1987, *Umweltblätter* denounced the high levels of smog in the city, not a report that pleased the government. On the night of 25 November 1987, the Stasi raided *Umweltblatter* circles, seizing all the gear present (including books from the FRG and a few copies of *Taz*, a West Berlin left-wing paper) and made five arrests. As further arrests and searches followed, to general surprise a public mobilisation was organised on 29 November; it attracted 600 people in East Berlin for a protest demonstration. This came to be known as the "Zion Affair" and it resonated beyond the GDR. Anarchist papers in West Germany like *Direkte Aktion* (anarcho-syndicalist), *Graswurzelrevolution* (anarcho-pacifist) and publications with ties to the autonomist scene such as *Interim* took up the case. Because of the unprecedented public protest, the GDR authorities then decided to drop the charges and released those arrested. *Umweltblätter* was then able to resume publishing but as a fortnightly, with an average print run of 3,000 copies and its readership expanded. 1987 also saw the appearance of *Kopfsprung* [Dive Headlong], an anarchist newspaper in which one could read articles about Landauer, the 1936 Spanish revolution, the Kurdish question and the thought of Murray Bookchin. Notwithstanding its initial small print run (about 300 copies), from issue No (1988) onwards, *Kopfsprung* established itself as an agitational and discussion platform for the tiny anarchist scene in the GDR and linked up with *Schwarzer Faden*, the anarchist review based in the FRG. In June 1987, there was the *Kirchentag von Unten* [Church From Below Convention], an event in the organisation of which *Umweltblatter* and *Kopfsprung* also played their parts and which drew upwards of a thousand people. That get-together was the occasion for a series of talks and public debates, for a number of punk concerts and for the swapping of contact details and news by the anarchist groups involved. During 1988, relations between the anarchists on both sides of the Wall were further boosted, whilst in Dresden the AAW mouthpiece *Die Ahnungslosen* [The Ingenues] appeared.

1989 was a decisive year. From the summer on, lots of East Germans started leaving the country, especially via Hungary (which had done away with border checks) and Austria. Meanwhile, the tiny opposition to the regime was becoming an impressive mass movement which managed to mount large demonstrations of tens of thousands of people. Erich Honecker handed over to Egon Krenz. The new leaders introduced a series of reforms, making it easier to get exit visas and permission to leave the country. On 9 November, the borders between the two Germanies were thrown open: the Wall came down. Anarchists were involved in all of this, albeit that they were sceptical about the so-called "reformers" in the SED whom they regarded as opportunists and cagey about much of the opposition but ready to have dialogue with them. On 9 November,

Umweltblatter became *telegraph*, a paper publishing at more or less weekly intervals under the auspices of Umwelt-Bibliothek and with an initial print-run of a few thousand.

After the Wall came down, anarchists in the moribund GDR were finally able to shrug off the oversight of the protestant Church, organise independently and publish freely. 1990 was the year of two milestones. On the one hand, anarchism in East Germany seemed to experience something of a boom. In the space of a year no less than thirteen reviews more or less within the libertarian orbit surfaced and January saw the very first joint demonstration by FRG anarchists and GDR anarchists against nuclear power. That same month, anarcho-syndicalists launched the Freie Arbeiterinnen und Arbeiter- Union der DDR (Free Female and Male Workers' Union of the GDR), with a foothold in eleven cities and they reprinted the *Prinzipienerklärung des Syndikalismus* [Declaration of Syndicalist Principles], a Rudolf Rocket text dating back to 1919 when it had served as the founding charter of the FAUD. Next came amalgamation with the FAU-IAA, founded in 1977 in Hamburg and in existence to this very day. Finally, a strong squatters' movement was taking shape. In the autumn of 1990 whilst the unification treaty whereby Germany reverted to being one, united state (3 October), East Berlin had a good 130 homes being squatted and out of them came not just quite sizeable demonstrations, like the 4 August demonstration in Frankfurter Tor, involving several thousand people, but also publications like *O(ohne) W(OHNUNG)* and above all *BesetzerInnenzeitung* [Squatters' Times], a printed weekly with a print run of 800-1,000 copies. But all of this concealed a separate dynamic with a completely opposite flavour. During 1990 in fact, the anarchists' influence within the GDR opposition went into decline. Being unconnected with the reunification process, the libertarian movement found itself marginalised. Their original chant of *Wir sind das Volk* (We are the people) was drowned out by the nationalist chant of *Wir sind ein Volk* (We are a people) as the neo-Nazi factions grew more aggressive. Members of it went so far later as to murder a number of the members of the GDR anarchist movement, such as **Silvio Meier**, a contributor to *telegraph* and an activist with the squatters' movement; he was killed by two neo-Nazis on 21 November 1992. To this day, there is an antifascist rally held in Berlin to commemorate him.

The only newspaper speaking for the anarchist movement in the GDR which has survived to date is *telegraph*, albeit with great difficulty and significant internal reshuffles. All the other papers – including *BesetzerInnenzeitung* – were to peter out between 1992 and 1993. Reflecting on these developments, Bernd Drücke in a recent article felt compelled to stress the importance of the GDR's tiny anarchist movement in the shaping of much of what the writer describes as "public counter-opinion", within which many extra-parliamentary activists earned their spurs. Drücke writes that the part played by the anarchists in the opposite to the SED regime is now largely overlooked. Besides, there are some things that seem never to change …