ANARCHISM IN EAST GERMANY (1945-1955)

When speaking of the anarchist movement in West Germany (FRG) or East Germany (GDR) in the post-war years we would do well to remember that anarchism was outlawed from 1933 to 1945: members of anarchist groups were arrested, murdered or sentenced to the lingering death of the concentration camp; the anarchist press vanished, and books and pamphlets were burned. So – for the few who survived – in 1945 anarchists had to begin all over again from zero and it was not long before authoritarian rule was established in East Germany and it employed the same methods vis à vis anarchists as the Nazi regime had.

Between the 1890s and 1933, German anarchism had been split into a variety of strands which, with the odd exception, never managed to come together in an organisation based on a few basic principles to which all anarchists subscribed. Let us briefly outline the nature of those strands.

1. INDIVIDUALIST ANARCHISM; Inspired by **[Max] Stirner**, this spread thanks to the writings of **John-Henry MacKay** (the philosopher-poet who 'rediscovered' Stirner and his work) and [Benjamin] Tucker. Individualist anarchist associations, Friends of Stirner and associations in favour of individualist culture were around in the 1920s, especially in Berlin and Hamburg. At present, the John McKay Society publishes the works of MacKay, Tucker, etc., as well as a series of anarchist studies that step outside the individualist framework proper.
2. LIBERTARIAN SOCIALISM: Its spokesman was **[Gustav] Landauer**: anti-Marx and their heir to Proudhon, Landauer inspired the action of groups belonging to the Socialist Union, in order to create, outside of the parameters of state and capitalism, free communities of producers, the primary cells of a libertarian society. Landauer's influence prior to 1914 made itself felt in Austria, Switzerland and even in France. In Israel, the construction of the kibbutzim drew inspiration from Landauer's ideas.
3. ANARCHO-COMMUNISM (or indeed libertarian communism): linked to the name of **Johann Most** (d. 1906) and drawing some inspiration from Bakunin and a lot from Kropotkin. **[Erich] Mühsam** was to pick up where Most left off and, at the time of the revolution in Munich in 1918, he set up the Union of Revolutionary Internationalists, and, ten years after that, the Anarchist Union, which was in competition with the Federation of Anarcho-Communists founded by **[Rudolf] Oestreich**. These two organisations vied with each other during the Weimar Republic and battled the rising tide of national-socialism, using different tactics.
4. ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM: In a backlash against class collaborationist trade union and deference to the state, the anarcho-syndicalists launched the Union of Free Workers of Germany (FAUD) in 1919 and under the guidance of **[Rudolf] Rocker**, **[Augustin] Souchy** and **[Arthur] Lehning**, it grew into a mass organisation with about 125,000 members by 1923. The FAUD lost influence very quickly however and by 1933 its membership had fallen to between 25,000 and 30,000.
5. "ANARCHIST" LIBERALISM: At the turn of the 20th century, **[Silvio] Gesell** had tried to amalgamate economic liberalism and anarchism. After 1919, this movement was to spread under the influence of Zimmermann; it opposed authoritarian socialism and violent anarchism and strove – under the designation of "a-cracy" – to devise a synthesis of economic liberalism and individualist anarchism. This current of thought was to fall victim – as we shall see anon – to totalitarian rule in East Germany.

By laying the stress of what divided them instead of what united them, the anarchists failed to arrive at a fraternal coordination of the various strands of anarchist thinking. There was,

though, for a brief moment, a point at which all the strands worked together: during the first, short-lived councils Republic in Bavaria in 1919, before the communist seizure of power, swiftly followed by the dictatorship of the soldiery. Gesell, Landauer and Mühsam and the anarcho-syndicalists featured side by side on the Bavarian Council Republic. Proof that necessity over-ruled factional squabbles, but such unity between anarchists was short-lived.

Up until 1933, Hamburg had been a centre of anarchist activity; a strong FAUD chapter, several anarchist or semi-anarchist newspapers and, among the latter *The Unionist*, the mouthpiece of the Workers' General Union umbrella organisation. Another paper, the *Proletarischer Zeitgeist*, published out of Zwickau (Saxony) from 22 March 1933 on – was anti-authoritarian and close to the anarchists. It was distributed by **Otto Reimers**, then supported by Otto Rühle who turned up to launch the Anti-Authoritarian Revolutionaries' Bloc which laid on series of talks in Hamburg that attracted a substantial audience (Rocker spelled out the main arguments of his book *Nationalism and Culture* there). In 1945 it was surviving members of this group that were the first to revive anarchism: there were only four of them, one being Reimers. Even before the announcement that Hitler was dead, Reimers was distributing leaflets denouncing the atrocities in the Buchenwald and Belsen concentration camps and calling for vengeance. From 4 May 1945 onwards, Reimers was addressing what Hamburg communists there were who had evaded the Nazi dictatorship: given the tragic circumstances of the labour movement, he called for the creation of a united revolutionary movement encompassing social democrats, communists and anarchists, a movement both anti-fascist and anti-capitalist. This rapprochement, which the communist leadership opposed, never came to fruition, despite Reimers's efforts. Only in March 1947 did the British occupation authorities authorise the establishment of the "Cultural Federation" for which Reimers and another pre-war anarchist activist, Langer, had been lobbying. That organisation adopted the title of the "Cultural Federation of Free, Anti-militarist Socialists". The Federation had its own premises, distributed 11 printed circulars during 1947, established links with five cities and kept up correspondence with comrades in 17 countries. But what was going on during those two tough years in the Russian-occupied zone? Could the anarchist movement bounce back in that part of Germany under Russian military and stalinist police control?

Zwickau is an industrial city in Saxony, not far from Chemnitz and the border with Czechoslovakia; steel plants, textile mills and coalmines abound in the area. Zwickau was the place from which *Proletarischer Zeitgeist* – the organ of the Workers' General Union published. In May 1945, there were only 6 surviving members of the Union left in Zwickau: 27 members had succumbed to the Gestapo. One of the survivors, **Willi Jelinek**, had managed to hold on to the *Proletarischer Zeitgeist's* subscriber list and to the most reliable names on the list he sent out detailed letters with an eye to reviving the organisation. As the Russian authorities were busy arranging an amalgamation of SPD and KPD members into a new Unified Socialist Party (SED) which was only a cover for the Communist Party, Jelinek denounced this ploy: "The Communist Party plays the part of the fox, eager to assuage the hare's fear by pretending to have turned vegetarian". In another letter sent out to anarchists (February 1946) Jelinek spoke out against any anarchist participation in a socialist-communist bloc and on this score, he espoused a different tack from Reimers up in Hamburg. He reckoned – and he reckoned wrongly – that any SPD-KPD union would be short-lived and that then the anarchists would come into their own. Hence the need for anarchists to get themselves organised. In June 1946, the Zwickau circle, boosted by former *Proletarischer Zeitgeist* readers and syndicalists, was up and running and issuing information circulars to anarchists in the Russian zone (the SBZ) and in West

Germany. In Saxony, 5 or 6 groups were formed and the same was true in Thuringia. Jelinek was in touch with the Hamburg anarchists, anarchists in Mulheim (in the Ruhr), Kiel and so on.

In the factory where he worked, Jelinek had been elected to chair the factory council by 95% of the workforce and he joined the Russian zone's FDGB union grouping as a way of extending his reach. The communists, who had known Jelinek for a long time, had reckoned that his thinking had altered. Right from the earliest factory council meetings, they were disabused of that idea and turned on Jelinek. Once the unified SED party was founded, the communists called upon Jelinek to step down from the chairman's position; he refused, and after that he became a target. The Zwickau circle set up an "Information Office" and sent out circulars setting out the insurmountable practical difficulties in the Russian zone: launching a lawful anarchist organisation, publishing a newspaper, using a copier. But it decided to carry on with its activities in spite of the ever-increasing material difficulties. It rejected the idea of "retrieving" the ex-anarchists who had joined the SED: the important thing was to recruit fresh comrades to anti-authoritarian thinking. In September 1947, the circle was forced to admit that the younger generation was not in much of a hurry to swell its ranks and it was short of publications to distribute. The priority was addressing the workers and showing them how the SED communists had misrepresented Marxism (Jelinek was perfectly conversant with Marxist literature). In late 1947 Jelinek was working on a pamphlet which never saw publication: in it, he denounced the dictatorship of the proletariat "which meant the authority of the leaders. Wherever there is obedience, there are leaders giving the orders". Any dictatorship meant government by minority. We can guess at the distribution of circulars and letters was becoming more and more difficult. Policemen and informers were watching Jelinek; as a precaution against his arrest, Jelinek had forwarded his list of former Zeitgeist subscribers to his comrade **Willy Huppertz** (in Mulheim). Huppertz, an anarchist since the 1920s, a maverick in social struggles and unaffiliated to any faction, not even to the FAUD, and himself a survivor of the Oranienburg concentration camp, looked after the drafting, publication and distribution of the monthly *Befreiung* review for 25 years, starting from March 1948. In the review, Huppertz saw to the publication of circulars and ensured that they were passed on to comrades in the Russian zone.

Jelinek still clung to a few dreams: he was hoping for a loosening up of the dictatorship inside the Russian zone, something that might make it possible to publish a newspaper and he wrote that even under Hitler the anarchists could not have made their case the way they could under Ulbricht! But the police noose was closing in on Jelinek. A letter meant for Reimers fell into the hands of the censors and, on 10 November 1948, Jelinek was arrested by two Russian officers accompanied by an interpreter and a German policeman from the crime squad. Searches were carried out and Jelinek's wife was arrested and interrogated at some length about Reimers and Huppertz; on her release, she found her home stripped of all furniture and commandeered. Moreover, an informer posing as an anarchist bearing a mandate had Huppertz forward him the subscribers' list passed on by Jelinek; those subscribers were called to a supposed meeting in Leipzig and placed under arrest. As for Jelinek, he was moved to Dresden and to the one-time Nazi concentration camp in Sachsenhausen where opponents of communist rule were held. Jelinek was charged with "fascist and militarist activities"! The November 1948 wave of arrests claimed 45 victims (receiving a total of 25 years in prison). A follow-up wave in the spring of 1949 led to the arrests of many anarchists (100 in Dresden alone). Not that that prevented the circulation of a leaflet within the "German Democratic Republic" (founded on 7 October 1949, this "Republic" replaced the Russian occupation zone) at the beginning of 1950.

In Sachsenhausen Jelinek ran into several of his comrades and banded them together into a little clandestine circle. He tried to re-establish contact with Reimers. Having been denied the right to work, he was on very meagre food rations. Because of his dealings with arrested comrades, he was them transferred to Bautzen prison. Where there was a deceptive improvement in prison conditions following the inauguration of the GDR. But this just meant that Russian guards were replaced by German ones, all SED members. Detainees suffered hunger, and lots died of TB. On 13 March 1950, a desperate revolt erupted, and a team made up of Russian officers and officers from the German "People's Police" promised improvements. Instead of which conditions grew even worse. Hence a further revolt on 30 March, but this was savagely put down. Jelinek managed to get word out to West Germany about the wretched conditions of thousands of detainees in Bautzen, Torgau and elsewhere. On 15 May 1950, the *Hamburger Echo* reported this appeal, issued "to the Red Cross, to the League of the Rights of Man, to all democrats, all people in the free world". We can only suppose that such an appeal earned Jelinek even harsher treatment. Time passed … At the beginning of 1952, two anarchists in Bautzen died of TB. On 20 March 1952, Jelinek was in good health during a visit from his daughter. But on 24 March he died, in circumstances as yet unknown. Maybe he was murdered just the way Mühsam was in the Nazi camps. Huppertz's little review, *Befreiung*, (May 1952) carried an article reporting Jelinek's passing and recalling his sterling activity on behalf of anarchism.

But it could be argued that by the end of 1949, the waves of arrests had broken up the anarchist groups inside the Russian Zone and decimated their best militants. All political or group activity was rendered impossible. Alone and in the shadows, a handful of isolated individuals had not given up hope in anarchism. They were around when the workers of East Berlin and the main industrial cities in the GDR revolted on 16 and 17 June 1953 against the SED party dictatorship and the regimen of police oppression which were exploitation re-branded as "socialism". We know how Russian troops and tanks crushed the uprising and of the crackdown that followed. A short while later the Darmstadt anarchists brought out a pamphlet for distribution in East Germany: published under the 'Die Freie Gesellschaft' (Free Society) imprint, this was *Tagebuch eines Namenlosen* (Diary of an Anonymous One). In the GDR, the anarchists had three options from which to choose: to fight, to falter or to flee. They had to opt for fight. They had to win the active support of the cream of the workers: passive support was pointless. Each isolated individual needed to act: "the problem of resistance is not, essentially, an organisational problem, but a matter of morale and personal bravery". The fight to be waged required collaboration with Russian, Ukrainian and Polish workers: restricting itself to changing the set-up in the GDR would condemn it to failure. Violent actions had to give way to passive resistance, bearing in mind whichever opposition currents might surface within the communist parties. The future was to show that the SED, reliant on the People's Police and army, and introducing increasingly repressive legislation, clung to its stalinist character and smothered the opposition by jailing or expelling non-conformist elements. By 1980, the militaristic, nationalistic, totalitarian GDR was still the stronghold of stalinism.

Though against all violent activity, the "liberal" anarchists were to succumb to the blows of the Russian occupation. Were they not, after all, opposed to authoritarian or statist Marxism? An international congress of liberal economists was to have been held in 1948 in Basel. **Hannelore Klein**, a 19 year old girl, secretary of her form's communist youth chapter (FDJ), had received an invitation and had travelled to Karlshorst to seek a travel permit from the authorities. She was asked to wait for a few minutes, and was then placed under arrest. Hauled in front of a Russian

court martial, she was charged with actions hostile to the socialist institutions: she expressed her view that their "socialist" regime was nothing but a regime of constraint and oppression. Her unflinching stance earned her – and two other comrades who had also been arrested – an eight-year prison term. Inside Bautzen prison, Hannelore carried on propagandising her fellow detainees.

Whether affiliated to the USSR, GDR or anywhere else – communists have always looked upon anarchists, or those suspected of anarchism, as their worst enemies. When dealing with anarchists, anything is permitted, from double-dealing to police coercion. The case of Erich Mühsam's wife, **Zensl Mühsam**, is particularly illuminating here. Erich perished in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp on 10 July 1934, murdered. On 16 July, his widow promptly fled to Czechoslovakia. She had not herself been a member of any anarchist organisation, but she felt duty-bound to inform the world of her husband's tragic fate and, if possible, see to it that his writings and many unpublished manuscripts got published. She wrote a pamphlet *The Calvary of Erich Mühsam* and tried to entrust publication of it to some Dutch trade unionists but – in the absence of a swift response – she made the mistake of taking up the offer made by the old Bolshevik activist Helena Stassova to have the thing printed in Moscow. As Zensl wrote to Rocker, she did so with some repugnance, as she had no intention of joining the Communist Party! Stassova then invited her to come to the USSR for a few months' rest. Zensl naively believed that she would have her independence there and might raise funds to have Erich's writings published and would not be in any way beholden to the USSR authorities. However, at a number of meetings, they had her spell out the ghastly conditions in Nazi concentration camps. And then, out of the blue, on 13 April 1936, she was arrested. Rudolf Rocker alerted a number of agencies dealing with political prisoners. André Gide secured her release sometime around August 1937. She then requested a visa to leave for the United States … and was rearrested in the middle of the night (1939) and sentenced to eight years' hard labour. After imprisonment in the Butyrki prison in Moscow, she was then shipped off to the Karaganda camp. She came back from there, covered in ulcers, in 1947. The German anarchists tried to obtain information about her past and current fate. The only thing they got from the SED government and Wilhelm Pieck were dilatory answers or total fabrications Not until 1955 was Zensl allowed to settle in East Berlin and she was refused permission to communicate with Rocker or with the Swedish syndicalists. Cut off from the rest of the world, she died in the GDR sometime in 1962. She had undergone her own 28-year Calvary from 1934 to 1962, just for having caved in one day by placing her trust in Bolsheviks!

Anti-authoritarian socialists close to the anarchists also fell victim to the GDR's "people's" police and courts. Here the case of **Alfred Weiland** is a case in point. Prior to 1933 Weiland had fought against the Nazis and was held in a concentration camp from August 1933 until the autumn of 1935. On his release, he resumed his illegal battle and during the war signed on with the army: but he was no more beyond the Gestapo's reach in the front lines than he had been in the rear. After the war, he resumed his activism and described himself as a "libertarian socialist". He called for unity between all the branches of anti-authoritarian socialism, anarchists and council communists. Weiland himself belonged to the council communist wing, its theoreticians being [Otto] Ruhle and the Netherlanders Pannekoek, Henriette Roland-Holst and Gorter. In March 1947, he launched the review *Neues Beginnen* (Fresh Start) as the theoretical mouthpiece of anti-authoritarians; in it the Russian regime was severely criticised, and it championed the idea of the economy's being run by workers' councils, a notion opposed both to western capitalism and to the state capitalism masked as dictatorship of the proletariat. The workers' councils would replace the traditional parties and the weapon of the workers

would be the wildcat strike. In the spring of 1950, *Neues Beginnen* was replaced by *Der Funke* (The Spark).

Berlin was the centre of Weiland's activities. During the early post-war years, he worked for the East Berlin Central People's Education Board and then at the Institute of Journalism. As a member of the Institute's works council, he quickly fell under suspicion from his colleagues who belonged to the SED and was abruptly dismissed – given just six minutes to get off the premises! Finding work as a teacher in a Volkshochschule (People's Highschool) in West Berlin, he mounted active propaganda against the KPD and the SED. Because of his many friends in East Berlin and across the GDR, he posed a threat to the communist dictatorship. On two occasions he was targeted for attacks from which he emerged safely. But on 11 November 1950, on a rainy, misty morning, as he was buying a newspaper at a kiosk at eight o'clock in the morning, he was abducted in the best gangster style. He was bundled into a car, after being coshed and, even though he fought back and shouted, he was dragged to the Ministry of State Security, handed over to the Russians and hauled up in front of a court martial on charges of high treason, espionage and sabotage. As there was no substance to these charges, the court released him … but handed him back to the very people who had abducted him! A GDR "people's" court preferred the same charges and sentenced Weiland to a 15-year jail term. He refused to make "honourable amends" and went on hunger strike seven times and had to wait two years before he could send news to his family. A campaign on his behalf was mounted by a number of West German organisations, including the League of Victims of Nazi Rule. After serving eight years, he was freed.

In London in August 1946 seven British anarchists, anti-militarist campaigners, decided to launch the International Bakunin Group which planned to direct its future propaganda efforts at a range of countries, most especially Germany and Italy. There were still lots of German and Italian POWs in Britain then and it proved possible to smuggle anarchist newspapers and pamphlets into their camps and to set up "cells". In September 1946, Shropshire hosted a conference in which some POWs took part. The moral and democratic re-education advocated by the Allies allowed for lecturers to visit POW camps and most of them were anarchists. A conference held in June 1947 indicated that the anarchist "cells" were proliferating. The prisoners' release date was drawing near. Thought had to be given to carrying the activities of the cells over into all four occupation zones back in Germany and especially the Russian zone, from where the bulk of the POWs came. A three-comrade structure was adopted, with each one free to recruit others to form a new group and a Bakunin International Group German section was formed. The person in charge of the section was ex-POW **John Olday**: unknown to the older anarchists and of uncertain identity, we know for sure that he was born in London of a German father and an English mother.

By December 1947, there were around 30 groups in German and 6 POW groups in Britain. The Bakunin Group and the British anarchist paper *Freedom* backed publication of the *Mitteilungen Deutscher Anarchisten* which Olday distributed in Germany. A heated controversy erupted between Rocker and Olday who drew inspiration from Mühsam's writings in his clashes with Rocker and the Swede [Helmut] Rüdiger. Olday became increasingly supportive of a violent struggle to destroy the state (Bakunin was certainly an influence here). He then fell out with the Bakunin International Group and set up his 'Spartacus' groups which were meant to bring together anarchists and council communists (1948) but the anarchists were outnumbered there, following a split.

Meanwhile, the anarchist cells in East Germany had faded out and Olday was increasingly moving in the direction that he referred to as "council anarchism". This led to a break with the

"International Group" and Olday focused more and more exclusively on the 'Spartacus' groups. The *Mitteilungen* became the *Räte-Anarchist* and even it ceased publication in the autumn of 1948. And Olday vanished from the political scene: he had generated a goodly number of ideas and revived the slogan of "all power to the councils", but, apart from some agitation in the Rhineland, the 3-man cells had failed and their activities inside the Russian zone were negligible.

1945-1955: It might be argued that over these ten years the communist regime (USSR or GDR) finished off liquidating those anarchists who had outlived Nazism. And not just the anarchists, but also the anti-authoritarian socialists or opposition communists claiming the champion "authentic" Marxism.

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