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ANARCHISM IN AUSTRIA: A BRIEF OUTLINE

Until 1879 there existed in Austria a fairly uniform working class movement in which all shades of socialists were represented and who were mostly organised in the "ARBEITERBILDUNGSVEREINEN". They represented a fairly radical opposition against the employers and the state. These on the other hand saw it in their interest to oppress the rising working class movement, to intimidate and divide them.

The first really bad split in the movement led in 1879, as the government had wished, to the participation of a part of the moderates within the state system. The majority however stayed in the radical section, which was at this time influenced by federalism and anarchism. They had since 1883 registered an increase of eighty thousand members. At the same time the state intensified its repression to an unheard of level.

Trials with long prison sentences to follow became common place, most agitators were arrested, deported or had to flee abroad, as in the case of Johann Most and Josef Peukert. It was so bad that the state of emergency in Vienna and Neustadt forced the anarchists underground and hence forth they had to take an illegalist line which resulted in the disbandment of a part of the movement.

The "legalists" had found in Victor Adler, a one time German nationalist a strong personality who propagandised the cause of the "centre party" inbetween the radical party and the moderate socialists. This idea was strongly supported by the government as they believed that one could control a legal parliamentary party far more easily than any extra parliamentary opposition.

So in 1889 the Social Democratic Party was founded at a conference held in Hainburg. As a result the state relaxed its repression on political opponents and it was therefore possible for many anarchists to return to Austria and once again take up their agitation against the state, which of course was never part of the government plan in legalising the Social Democratic Party. The anarchist movement quickly began to expand, and up

to 1893 the movement experienced a growth of several thousand members in various groups. The state was soon to react and repression followed, all anarchist groups, publications and organisations were outlawed. There followed a period of resistance, with "terrorist" styled acts of vengeance against the state. The socialists were unaffected by these laws and took the opportunity to improve their position. The anarchists were soon to reemerge again, in 1907 Pierre Ramus (Rudolf Grossman) published the "Anarchist Manifesto".

It was above all an appeal for anarcho-communism, though it did contain some threads of Tolstian thought. But it failed to influence the workers within the sphere of the social democrats, instead it began to attract a "bohemian type" of anarchist, well read with strong individualist tendencies. During these years times were bad for the anarchist movement which never had more than a few hundred members. Some small anarcho-syndicalist groups were organised but they quickly fell apart with the outbreak of the First World War. The "bohemian" anarchists seem to have held together during these years and had some influence over the now defeated and unemployed returning soldiers in 1918/19. A great help was Pierre Ramus who was a fine public speaker and who had no rivals to talk of. But he lacked the necessary organisational qualities and therefore failed to use the wide spread unrest for anarchist gain. Once again the social democrats were quick to rush in and lay claim to be the peoples choice. Between the Wars the anarchists had little or no political influence. But they were very strong in a politically cultural way, several anarchist groups founded GARTENSIEDLUNGEN², they defended the idea of autonomous VERSORGUNGS-³RICHTUNGEN and introduced naturism to Vienna by simply occupying a part of the Donau. Anarchists were also active in Graz, the second city of Austria. Pierre Ramus and his followers were not the only anarchists who were active and in fact there existed a militant underground group who rejected "cultural anarchism". This group in 1927 took direct action against the state and set the Palace of Justice on fire. During the years of the clerical fascist dictatorship of Dollfuss, all anarchists were persecuted. Ramus was too dangerous to let go, he managed to escape but was murdered on a boat on his way to Mexico. In 1936/37 an underground publication appeared but its mailing list fell into police hands and many anarchists paid with their lives for this mistake.

For years after World War Two there was little activity, in 1955 a group organised by Luise Eisenwenger published a paper DER ANTIMILITARIST which lasted until 1965. As recent as 1974 there was only one paper BEFREIUNG published by Ferdinand Gross, and a small group of old comrades were active in Graz at the same time, they were followers of Ramus. In 1979 the paper LIBERTE was founded in Vienna with a circulation of fifteen hundred.

Today there is an active anarchist movement in Austria, especially in Vienna and Graz, and several magazines are published by the comrades there. To the best of our knowledge there are no anarcho-syndicalist groups active at present, but then we should remember that Austria is a very rural based society.

NOTES:

translated: IF

- 1) Arbeiterbildungsvereine; This was a type of organisation which was a cross between a workers educational club and a trade union.
- 2) Gartensiedlungen; Garden settlements/allotments.
- 3) Versorgungseinrichtungen; Nursing homes.
- 4) Information on anarcho-syndicalist groups is very hard to come by and some of it seem to be very confused, i.e. the BUND HERRSCHAFT-LOSER SOZIALISTEN (Union of Anti-authoritarian Socialists) who were present at the IWA Congress in Toulouse in 1951 representing we must assume the anarcho-syndicalists of Austria, did not believe in any form of organisation other than loose affinity groups. In fact in the 1930's the BHS failed to support the waiters and drivers in their attempt to unionise themselves.
- 5) On July 15th 1927, some fascists who had murdered revolutionary workers were acquitted by the court in Vienna. Quickly a workers demonstration was organised, fighting broke out with mounted police batonning and shooting the crowds. The workers fought back and stormed the Palace of Justice, which was occupied by the police who were using it as a position to fire on the crowds, it was at this point that a group of comrades set the building on fire. A general strike was called and the socialist party leaders fearing that they would lose control of the situation went along with the strike call until they once again gained control. The SCHUTTZBUND, a workers armed militia under the control of the SDP, did save many lives by holding the crowds back from the line of police fire, but in doing so allowed the police to escape from the burning Palace. This time was the closest Austria ever came to revolution, the people were betrayed not by the SCHUTTZBUND who would have willingly fought to the death, but by the leadership of the SDP who could never decide when the time was right. When the SDP was outlawed in 1934 they called upon the workers to rise up and save them, but by then the SCHUTTZBUND was without arms, having been betrayed by middle class army officers, and the workers had had enough of the SDP.