Red or Black: The Effect of the Russian Revolution on Anarchism in the United States

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Abstract

By 1920, the new Bolshevik government in Russia had employed authoritarian means to secure its position in the Russian Revolution. The implementation of capitalist reforms, the development of a secret police force, and the suppression of free speech under Lenin intensively challenged what anarchists had envisioned of the socialist revolution. Anarchists, socialists who believed in the minimizing hierarchy, divided across the world over how the movement should rationalize the Russian Revolution. In the United States, anarchists faced numerous mounting problems by 1917. Before the revolution, the United States had taken measures to repress anarchism due to such events as the assassination of President William McKinley by an anarchist, successful organizing by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and the Luigi Galleani anarchist bombings that lasted from 1914 to 1932. In the midst of the crackdown by the government, anarchists increasingly encountered pressure to take sides relative to the Russian Revolution: Were they red, and supporters of the Bolsheviks; or were they black, and denouncers of authoritarianism in all its forms?

My proposal seeks to examine the shifts across anarchist lines in the United States, in response to the Russian Revolution. Focusing on the period of 1916 to 1935, I will document and interpret the variety of reactions anarchists had towards Bolshevism and the emerging Communist Party in the United States. Historical interest in anarchism during the post-World War I period of the United States has been overshadowed by the rise of the Communist Party, save for the famous trial of the anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, resulting in a poor understanding of division and directions within the anarchist movement. With my research, I hope to understand the ways in which anarchists chose sides, whether it be remaining an
anarchist, joining the Communist Party, or distancing one's self entirely from radical politics. I will explore the relationship between the declining IWW and the emerging Communist Party, the government repression that grouped together American anarchism and American Bolshevism, the presentation of radical politics by mass media, differences in how Bolshevism and anarchism addressed race and sexuality, and trace notable anarchists across the period in order to understand how they engaged with the Bolshevik idea that the "end justifies the means."

My research will use various primary sources, such as anarchist periodicals and letters, literature relating to the Russian Revolution, communist and anarchist political treatises, newspapers, and official documents regarding radical politics and labor, in order to reveal the extent to which the Russian Revolution affected American anarchism. Through analyzing primary sources by or about various anarchists, I hope to discover how they chose their path relative to Bolshevism. I will investigate how the Communist Party backed by a socialist state attracted anarchist labor organizers, as well as how the draconian measures of Lenin drove others to denounce his party. Anarchism tends to be exceedingly difficult to research due to its lack of structured record keeping and its informal organization practices. Therefore, my research will rely on interpretation of relevant primary writings by American anarchists and first-hand observers to reveal underlying migrations across political divisions of anarchism in the post-Russian Revolution era.