

IN DEPTH

“The whole world is our homeland”: Anarchist antimilitarism

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Anarchism as a form of human liberation and as a social, cultural and economic alternative is an idea born from the European Illustration. It belongs to the rationalism school of thought that believes in the education of the individual as the essential tool for the transformation of society. The anarchists fight for a future society in which there is no place for the State or authoritarianism, because it is a society structured in small, self-sufficient communities with a deep respect for nature, a concept already present among the utopian socialists. A communitarian (though non necessarily anti-individualistic) basis that will be strengthened by the revolutionary trade unionism who uses direct action and insurrectional tactics for its vindications. On a political level, the anarchists make no distinction between goals and methods, because they consider that the fight is in itself a goal.

In the anarchist denunciation of the modern state's authoritarianism the concepts of army and war are logically present. This denunciation was ever-present in the years when workers internationalism appeared, due to the growth of modern European nationalisms, the independence of former American colonies and the Asian and African context. The urban proletariat and many labourers from around the world become the cannon fodder in these bloodbaths of youth and devastations of large areas of the planet. The workers' protest is hence channelled through its own growing organizations (trade unions, workmen's clubs, benefit societies, etc), with the support and the loudspeaker of abundant pacifist literature that will soon be published in clandestine booklets or pamphlets that circulate on a hand-to-hand basis¹. We can see how

anarchist antimilitarism is always linked to antistatism and pacifism, since it fights against the very existence of the military institution – considered one of the pillars of the modern state. This anarchist antimilitarism has adopted various forms throughout the years, all of them connected to the European and American tradition: conscience objection, draft-dodging, insubordination and, of course, the civil disobedience that went all the way back to Thoreau, Mc Say, Spooner, Tucker, etc.

If we look at the Anarchist Encyclopedia organized by Sebastien Faure in the 1920s in Paris we see that on the subjects of the army, militarism, pacifism, the flag, the fatherland, etc., there are many entries by different authors. Most of them share a concern about war and they always link it to the social problem. Their analysis discards the nationalist or colonial problem, focusing instead on the problem of the inequality between nations. They condemned militarism in two aspects: an army, whatever its size has a chemical arsenal destined to destroy the enemy; and a formidable police force spread out through the territory destined to obtain obedience (through coercion or fear) from the less fortunate strata of society. So, for many anarchists, to transform a society through justice, liberty and social welfare, the extinction of the army was absolutely necessary, since that would bring about the disappearance of “fatherlands” and States due to lack of support. Pacifists were in favour of direct action, proclaiming their belief in “Pacifism but not passivity; a concept expressed by Paul Gille that embodies the beliefs of most of the libertarian thinkers, who did not discard the use of arms in actions of social revolution or in acts of self-defence or disobedience of the armed forces of the State.

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The Spanish and Catalan internationalists also shared this antimilitaristic stance and they condemned the bourgeoisie’s satisfaction with the colonial army. In their publications we find articles, verses or essays asking for anti-war position in various

sectors of the society. An example is the text by Cels Gomis, an ethnographer, called *A las madres*/"For the mothers" (1887). The idea behind links it to the first French anarcofeminists and malthusians, like Madaleine Vernet or Maria Huot, who were in favour of women not having children who might be destined to fight in nationalist or colonial wars. This same ideology was behind the creation of the Spanish Unión Progresiva Femenina, like Amalia Domingo Soler and her poem *Patria* (Fatherland). The inclusion in the syllabus of Ferrer i Guàrdia's *Escuela Moderna* (Modern School) of the book *Pensamientos Antimilitaristas* (Anti-war thoughts), that reflected the aspirations of scientific rationalists of the early 20th century.

Within this social magma that grouped wide sectors of the organized urban proletariat, the antimilitarist sentiment was always present. Specially so when associated to the extremely unpopular "sistema de quintes" (Draft system) that deeply affected the Spanish 20th century, reaching aspects of urban revolt as impressive as those of July 1909 in Barcelona and its surrounding areas, in events that came to be known as the "Setmana Tràgica" (Tragic Week). The cause of the widespread violence was the refusal to send the reservists to the war in Morocco.

So we see that the international anarchist movement presented, from the very beginning, many initiatives in favour of deserting the army. They organized themselves by creating networks to hide the deserters in various countries. On the other hand, the press also helped in making this position known, with writings by left-wing (but not necessarily anarchists) critics, such as Herbert G. Wells, Oscar Wilde, Romain Rolland, Bertran Russell, Jules Verne or the-very popular-Anatole France, who campaigned in favour of peace in their books. The press also gave a wider public to the ideas of Lev Tolstoi, an anarcho-Christian and, of course, Mahatma Gandhi, who defended direct action with his non-violent campaigns of civil disobedience. There was a widespread debate, and in the years before and during the Great War, it became much more intense.

**“ Kropotkin’s pro-Allies position was confronted
against most of the anarchists such as**

Malatesta, who supported a working-class antimilitarism ”

The most renowned dispute was the one that confronted the Russian geographer Piotr Kropotkin and some of his followers against most of the anarchists in the world, and particularly against the Italian Enrico Malatesta. We find details of Kropotkin's position in the detailed biography that George Woodcock² wrote of him, where he reflects on his pro-Allies position that had a huge impact on the contemporary labour movement. Kropotkin mistrusted the Germans due to the support and protection they had always to the Tsars and he aligned himself with position of Russian exiles in France or England (Bakunin, Herzen, etc...) where they could operate without repression, creating organizations and publishing their works.

Kropotkin published various articles against the German arms race in the months before the First World War, a fact that caused a great confusion in the anarchist camp. It was one of the worse moments in his life because he lost many beloved friends, among them, Malatesta. The most remarkable incident took place among the “Llibertat” group. Most of its members disagreed with Kropotkin but-making use of their principle of non-coercion of personal liberties-they published his text in the *Freedom* newspaper. In October 1914 a letter was published, addressed to professor Steffen from Norway, in which the Russian geographer defends his pro-Ally stance and he attacks the antimilitarism of the working classes. He published two more similar articles.

The reaction in the form of article and letters of protest did not take long and they were also published. In one of them Malatesta says: “In fact, Kropotkin is now against antimilitarism because he considers that national issues have to be solved before the social ones. We think the national rivalries and hatreds are the best weapon that the owners have to perpetuate the slavery of the workers, and we have to oppose them with all our might. As far as the right of small nationalities to preserve, if such was their wish, their language and traditions, it is only a question of liberty and it will only be solve once and forever when, once the States have been destroyed, every human being, every individual, will have the right to associate with any group whenever he wants (...) I never could've even dreamed that Kropotkin could invite the workers to do common

cause with the governments and the wealthy”.

The dispute continued around *Freedom*, which had been founded by Kropotkin himself. He was deeply enraged and, although gravely ill, he decided to sever his links with the publication, which continued to be antimilitaristic. The Russian anarchist was supported by Jean Grave, Carlo Malato i Paul Reclus (son of Élisée, and also a geographer).

“ The antimilitaristic libertarians could only admit one kind of war, the war of liberation by the oppressed against the oppressors ”

In 1916, with the war raging on, the French agitator Jean Grave visited Kropotkin in Brighton and together they wrote the Manifesto of the Sixteen, in which they defended war. It was signed by convinced anarchists, like Guérin, Cherkezof, Malato, Reclus, Cornelissen... up to 15³. The text was published in *La Bataille Syndicaliste* and, significantly, the old fighter James Guillaume, who had sometimes manifested himself in favour of war, did not sign it. In Spain, Ricardo Mella gave support to Kropotkin's position.

An answer did not take long to appear, from the majority of European and American anarchism. The already mentioned Enrico Malatesta and Alexander Shapiro, elected in the Assembly of the Anarchist International in 1907, signed a declaration. They were joined by Domela Nieuwenhuis, Emma Goldman, Berkman, Bertoni, Ianomvski, Charles Albert, André Colomer, Marcel Dieu (known as Hem Day), Coatmeur Gerard Hervé and many more. A bit later, Luigi Fabbri, Sébastien Faure, Émile Armand, Han Ryner and others also signed. Rudolf Rocker, even though he was against the war, could not sign because he had been interned. The entire staffs of the main publications also joined the “no to war”, like (the already mentioned) *Freedom*, the American *Mother Earth*, the French *Le Libertaire* and all the individualists clustered around the-also French-newspaper *L'Unique*.

It is also worth mentioning that in April 1915, In Ferrol, Galicia, an International Congress for Peace had been held, promoted by the CNT and held in the Trade Union's Athenaeum. The followers of the position of *Freedom*, spearheaded by Malatesta, collaborated in the congress: Eusebi Carbó, Àngel Pestaña, Antonio Loredó, Mauro Bajatierra, José López, Bouza, and many more. Despite the government's prohibition, the detention of working class militants and the deportations of foreigners, two sessions were celebrated with the intervention of delegates from Spain, France, Argentina and Brazil.

Among many other reasonings, the antimilitaristic libertarians said they could only admit one kind of war, the war of liberation "by the oppressed against the oppressors, the exploited against the exploiters", to promote "the spirit of rebellion" and fight against any form of authority, with the state as its most significant embodiment.

1. There is not enough space in this article to quote the various sources where the internationalists reject the actions of the military and the explicit calls for desertion and the abandonment of arms.

2. Woodcock, G. i Avakumović I. *The anarchist prince: A biographical study of Peter Kropotkin*, New York: Schocken Books, 1971

3. Even though there only 15 signatures, the text is known as the Manifesto of the Sixteen because initially Hussein Dey was considered another author, when it really is a place name.

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- Anarchist Alexander Berkman speaking in Union Square, NYC 1914 -

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