Anarchists and Crime

by Katrina Gulliver

The anarchist as a figure in crime is distinct. His goals are not financial, and the terrorist acts committed under the heading of anarchism have ranged from assassinations of public figures to bombings of random civilians. He has also slid far enough into history to seem quaint, or vaguely romantic, from the vantage point of the twenty-first century.

The anarchist "movement" (if we could apply such a concept to a decentralized group) was the beginning of modern global terrorism. The idea that killing, bombing, were a tactic to bring adversaries to the negotiating table, in the age of mass media, was a novel concept, in the late nineteenth century. It would be a model followed by various political sects to come. But anarchists did not want negotiations.

Their nihilism marks them out against groups like the Fenians (roughly contemporary, and operating mostly in Britain, with some activities in North America), who had a clear political goal. The Fenians wanted Ireland to be independent from

Britain. Whether one agreed with their tactics, the motive was coherent (if alarming to the British authorities).

Meanwhile, the anarchists (unlike socialists) tended to offer vague ideals as their results. They did not participate in elections or seek to gain support through normal political means. “Burn it all down” was their message. One that was resonant for disaffected young men - as it always has been. There’s a reason terrorist groups and street gangs alike all recruit from this particular demographic.

And the rapid social and political changes of nineteenth century Europe proved a fertile ground for those who wished to support this ideology. Industrialization had produced a deracinated urban underclass, and changing borders had left various ethnic groups feeling disenfranchised. The overthrow of capitalism, and social order itself, was an idea that lured in idealists and psychopaths alike.

Anarchists committed attacks in Spain and France in the 1890s, including the assassination of French president Sadi Carnot in 1894. Various royals were killed by anarchist assassins, including Antonia Canovas del Castillo in 1897; Empress Elizabeth in

1898; King Umberto of Italy in 1900.[1] It was not surprising that the general public both considered themselves under siege by anarchists, and that the figure of the anarchist would become a mainstay of popular culture.

From the perspective of the law, anarchists presented a particular challenge. There was no defined leader - any criminal could declare himself an anarchist (and there was not an official organization who could disclaim him either). Much like the "lone wolves" of terrorist reports today, anarchists of the nineteenth century were often "self-radicalized".[2] But this radicalization did not come from thin air, there were anarchist newspapers, and groups, who encouraged this ideology.

The contrast in approach between the United Kingdom and the countries of continental Europe is illustrative, both of different philosophies of law (the common law versus civil law), and a broader difference in social attitudes. London became a

[1] Gage, Beverly. 2009. *The Day Wall Street Exploded: A Story of America in Its First Age of Terror*. New York: Oxford University Press. p.64
[2] Katrina Gulliver "How Isis Resemble's Yesterdays Anarchists," *American Conservative.* October 2016

haven in the mid-nineteenth century for political renegades of all stripes fleeing the continent, as over 7000 fled to London after the turmoil of 1848.[3] Compared to other nations in Europe, Britain was very open to foreigners. The Aliens Act of 1793 (restricting entry) had been repealed in 1826. Through the rest of the nineteenth century, the UK became the preferred destination of choice for many political exiles, who were allowed to carry on their politics publicly. No political refugee was refused entry or expelled until the Aliens Bill of 1905.[4] Passports were not even required until the First World War. This prompted a "European mainland's stereotype of a selfish Britain that assured its own impunity from bomb attacks by offering anarchists an asylum that they exploited by venturing forth to assault the population and rulers of the continent."[5]

European nations had spies in England keeping tabs on their own dissidents who were living there.

[3] Butterworth, Alex. *The World That Never Was: A True Story of Dreamers, Schemers, Anarchists and Secret Agents*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2010. p. 8
[4] Gainer, Bernard, *The Alien Invasion: The Origins of the Aliens Act of 1905* (London: Heinemann, 1972).
[5] Jensen, Richard Bach, *The Battle Against Anarchist Terrorism: An International History, 1878-1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

Meanwhile, the British police were largely indifferent to these new arrivals. Britain's free speech traditions meant that anarchists could openly promote their views, demonstrating in public and giving speeches.[6] This laissez faire attitude to radicals in their midst would change as Fenian activities were amped up, resulting in the creation of the Metropolitan Police's Special Branch (then known as Special Irish Branch). The Fenian threat led to Britain coming down hard on sympathizers of Irish independence (a stance that continued through policing of the IRA later in the twentieth century); the activities of European anarchists were of less interest to London's authorities.

But the relationship of anarchists to the law would highlight the challenges of individual liberties, and the balancing of security and freedom. Hayek's vision of isonomia, and equality under the law, was challenged when legal systems encountered the terrorist threat. Anarchists would be treated differently, and this model would continue to be reflected in anti-terror legislation to this day.

[6] Katrina Gulliver, "London and the Spectre of Anarchy: Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* as Urban History", Journal of Literary Studies, Volume 37, Issue 3, 2021.

The number of active anarchists, as in those who actually committed crimes in the name of anarchy (as opposed to those who perhaps leafed through the pages of *Liberty,* or attended a couple of meetings in a saloon), was small. Their disconnectedness added to their failures. Individuals acting alone typically did not have the resources or skills for spectacular acts. High profile assassinations aside, most would-be anarchist bombings were failures, and not uncommon were the bombings that killed only the bomber himself. But it was the randomness of such incidents that created fear, which would become the model of a terrorist movement. It was not the actual "motley" anarchist group but the cultural fears associated with it that gave anarchism its power.[7]

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, considered the father of anarchism, had coined the phrase “property is theft!” in 1840. Bombings could also be carried out by an individual, so the “dynamite bomb was thought to equalise the power of the individual with that of the police.”[8]

[7] Phillips, Wm. M. *Nightmares of Anarchy*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2003. p. 17
[8] Phillips, Wm. M. *Nightmares of Anarchy*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2003. p. 67

The *British Medical Journal* in 1906 published a short article on "The Psychology of the Anarchist."[9] In this it is argued that anarchists are not necessarily insane; rather that they consist of two types. The "misguided enthusiast" (who may be highly intelligent and sane), and the "perverted follower" (the "insane or degenerate, easily influenced and specially liable to emotional appeals"). The latter were those encouraged by the former to commit violence in aid of political goals. Such followers are also easily identified by cult-leaders, so it is hardly surprising that they would fall under the sway of anarchist ideology, particularly presented by charismatic leaders.

While anarchism itself was not a coherent group, nobody paid monthly dues to the "International Anarchist Guild" or anything like it, there were influential anarchists, who printed pamphlets, spoke at meetings and were seen as inspirations to many who went on to commit crimes. One of the most well-known was Luigi Galleani. His story, and the social changes it represented, were one of the factors in challenging the concepts of equality under

[9] "The Psychology of the Anarchist", *The British Medical Journal,* 9 June 1906.

the law, and the civil liberties that the common-law system claims to represent.

This challenge to isonomia in the American response to the anarchist threat, resulted in changes to the layout of both law enforcement and immigration law for decades to come.

The first major anarchist incident in the U.S. was the Haymarket Bombing in Chicago in 1886, in which there were 11 deaths; the ensuing riots led to over a hundred arrests. Those convicted were mostly German-born, and the foreign origins of anarchists was a major factor in how they were treated by the press and the law. Fifteen years later, President William McKinley was shot by anarchist Leon Czogolz. The impacts of these attacks, and those that followed, culminated in both legislative and criminal justice responses that swiftly traded equality under the law for suspicion based on race and politics. It also led to changes in immigration law that would last for decades.

The first major change was the Immigration Act of 1903 (aka the Anarchist Exclusion Act), which rendered inadmissible four classes of immigrant - anarchists, epileptics, beggars, and importers of prostitutes. However, the impact of this law was

slight. Immigration restrictionists did not feel the law went far enough, with a report from the Commissioner-General of Immigration to the Secretary of Labor in 1913 arguing that anarchists simply bided their time after arrival until the threat of deportation had passed (those present in the US for more than 3 years were immune from deportation).[10]

The figure of the anarchist became a mainstay of news reports and popular culture. As urban theorist Robert Redfield wrote, the anarchist was a distinctly city-based character:

> "Among social types that appear in this aspect of the cultural process in the city are the reformer, the agitator, the nativistic or nationalistic leader, the tyrant and his assassin, the missionary and the imported school teacher."[11]

The urban nature of anarchism as a movement reflected its development in an industrial era, it was

[10] *Report of the Commissioner-General of Immigration to the Secretary of Labor for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1913* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office)

[11] Redfield, Robert, and Milton Singer. "The Cultural Role of Cities," In *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities*, edited by Richard Sennett, 206–33. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1969. p. 221

an extreme end of the continuum of workers' rights movements drawing on disparate philosophies from Karl Marx to revival religion. In America, as in Britain, anarchists were overwhelmingly drawn from the ranks of immigrant communities.

While anarchism was a popular talking point for middle-class dilettantes, the kind of "parlor pinks" who wanted to pose as rebellious, those who actually participated in violence tended to be from the working classes.

As historian Beverly Gage wrote,

> "By the late 1880s, the image of the anarchist bomb thrower could be found not just in cartoons but also on the front pages of big-city newspapers, in lurid descriptions of bomb plots hatched in the sort of poor, dark, immigrant neighbourhood that Chicagoans referred to as the 'terror district'."[12]

While the Haymarket participants were from the German community of Chicago, it would later be those from Southern and Eastern Europe who were

[12] Gage, Beverly. *The Day Wall Street Exploded: A Story of America in Its First Age of Terror.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.p.42

most associated with anarchist ideology, and impacted by immigration laws.

In the U.S. the transition came with the First World War. Already on a defensive footing for the conflict, legislators were primed to pass laws against foreign insurrectionists, spies, and other threats. Measures were passed against "enemy aliens" (a flexible term), and the 1918 Immigration Act, included the intent to "exclude and expel from the United States aliens who are members of the anarchistic and similar classes."

In April 1919, some enemy aliens made themselves known, with a series of mail bombs to prominent individuals. There were few deaths, mostly due to the bombers' incompetence (some parcels were not delivered due to insufficient postage). But the attacks were spectacular. One of the intended victims was Senator Thomas Hardwick of Georgia, a sponsor of the Immigration Act. The bomb mailed to him instead blew off the hands of his maid, when she lifted the box, and severely injured his wife. More bombings would follow in June, one killing ten police officers (although they were not the intended targets; the bomb had been placed in a church but was taken to a police station). An

anarchist accidentally killed himself when placing a bomb at the home of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer.

Those responsible were followers of Luigi Galleani, an activist well known in the Italian community for his speeches and advocacy of the "propaganda of the deed". Prosecuted in Italy for labor activism, he fled to the United States, where he quickly gained acolytes, known as *Galleanisti.* He published a subversive newspaper (in Italian), and spoke at meetings. He advocated an end to private property, and assassinations of authority figures to achieve overthrow of the state. His role in the bombings helped to cement the idea that anarchists were foreigners, importing their foreign grievances to the United States. His influence also shows the pattern of the charismatic leader (who is not planting the bombs himself) and his more suggestible followers actually committing acts of violence.

The crackdown that followed the bombings would be known as the Palmer Raids, for the Attorney General. In 1920, police conducted broad sweeps, without warrants, and arrested thousands of immigrants. This was profiling of a group, guilt by association, and many would be released without

charge. Hundreds would still be deported, as the American justice system responded to a "foreign" threat by kicking a lot of foreigners out - and restricting how many of their countrymen could enter.

This wave of crackdowns and anarchist panic would become known as the first Red Scare. Unlike the Red Scare of the 1950s, where those targeted were often prominent individuals, and the fear was that communists had infiltrated the halls of power - in the 1920s the targets were mostly poor and powerless.

The Palmer raids also offered a great opportunity to expel known troublemakers. The most prominent deportees were Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. They had both served time in prison before the raids, in his case for attempted murder. They departed America on the *Buford*—a ship nicknamed "the Soviet Ark," along with dozens of others who had immigrated from Russia.

The expulsion of anarchists brought up some thorny cases of citizenship too. Emma Goldman had claimed she was a US citizen through marriage (and thus immune to deportation); the court decreed that her husband's naturalization had been revoked due

to his own criminal conviction, and this invalidated hers too. A previous legal provision that immigrants present for over 5 years could not be deported had been removed in the Immigration Act of 1918, which also offered an expanded definition of "anarchist". This changing of definition in law in who was a national, who could be deported, and an expansion of suspicion on immigrants offers an unstable position for the individual against the state.

Under the law, anarchists were those who sought to overthrow the government by force, plus any groups who advocated this, any of their affiliates, associates, publishers of pamphlets, etc. The loose conception of "affiliate" meant that many in workers' rights groups in immigrant communities could be accused of anarchist tendencies.

The cases of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti became something of a cause-celebre, reflecting the public grappling with the issue. They were arrested and later convicted for armed robbery and murder in the theft of the payroll at a shoe factory. After their arrest, Wall St was bombed, an attack that killed 38 people and seriously injured 143. It was never officially solved but assumed to be a revenge attack for either Sacco and Vanzetti's arrest or Galleani's

deportation (or both). After their 1921 conviction for armed robbery in Massachusetts, appeals rattled on through the 1920s, and some prominent figures came to their support, and asked for a new trial. Sacco and Vanzetti were held up not as street criminals but as members of a Galleanist cell. That they were victims of anti-anarchist (and anti-Italian) scapegoating was a widely held view. There were street protests for them all around the world.

The threat of anarchists was symbolic as well as practical, for other groups - as socialists had to try to dissociate themselves from violent extremists of the left. For many, the link remained. Eugene Debs had a high level of public support in the 1920s, and the Soviet Union was not yet the evil empire it would be seen as later. But the Red Scare meant that *red* had a broad meaning, encompassing Trotskyites, nihilist bombers, ethnonationalist and anticolonialist, as well as some labor activists.

The bombings of 1919 also spurred the creation of the FBI. Law enforcement's adaptation to what was perceived as a national (and possibly) global threat, was to expand powers and create agencies with broader authority: a pattern seen in anti-terror law today. Granting the creation of a new federal law

enforcement agency with wide discretion also allied with the expansion of federal law to encompass more crimes that would previously have been prosecuted under state law.

However, the general public's views (and fears) were clear. Anti-immigrant sentiment was easily grafted onto anti-anarchist concerns, and the shadowy nature of anarchist groups played onto this fear. Random innocent civilians *had* been killed by anarchist attacks, in the US and abroad. Unlike some moral panics, the fear itself was not entirely baseless. For those who had seen chaos abroad in newsreels, and then saw it arrive on America's shores with assassinations and bombings, this was an imminent threat that had to be addressed.

The press reflected this view, as shown in this New York *Times* editorial of 1919:

> "There are ten or eleven millions of aliens here. Why give any questionable new arrival the benefit of the doubt? Why not give the country that benefit? Why let loose aliens who are to be deported? The humane sympathies of the immigration authorities do them honor, no doubt, but sometimes lead

> them into strange tenderness towards undesirables and even anarchists".[13]

The public mood was in favor of harsher restrictions, and harder lines being drawn on who could be American. If as Hayek argued, isonomia was an essential part of the US constitution, the elision came in deciding to whom the constitution applied. As a creedal nation, the edge cases of American-ness (and constitutional protections), are still debated.

The flexibility of the term "anarchist" meant that the idea quickly lent itself to the kind of conspiracising favored by those who think world events are dictated by secret cabals of Freemasons or Opus Dei. The anarchist, as the antagonist in fiction, was a perfect foil for adventure heroes. For the authorities, it was a convenient label to apply to violent crime, particularly involving immigrants, to justify harsher prosecution.

Globally, the goal of anarchists was not to be achieved (and the amorphous nature of individual anarchists' claims mean that many were operating for distinct ambitions under the "anarchist" label).

[13] "Alien Anarchists", NYT, Dec 15, 1919.

The establishment of the Soviet Union (and its comintern activities) attracted hard left activists in support of the revolution. Individual ethnic nationalist terror groups would also draw in the disaffected in different parts of the world. Anarchism as a worldview ceased to have an appeal. Anarchist newspapers disappeared, and the radical leaders moved on.

Crime in the name of the anarchist cause had largely evaporated by the 1930s, with a few holdouts. By 1933, the attempted assasination of President Franklin Roosevelt in 1933 was almost an anachronism (the perpetrator Giuseppe Zargara was an Italian immigrant, which also cemented in people's minds the idea that the crackdown had been right). The Second World War ended it entirely. Changing geopolitics focused public fears on the nuclear threat, not the immigrant bomb thrower.

Meanwhile the laws enacted in the 1920s as part of the red scare would have a permanent effect on American society. It produced the"great pause" of immigration, which only ended with the Hart-Celler Act of 1965. It still had a longer demographic tail: the % of foreign born in the United States was

lowest in 1973, as the last of the Ellis Island generations passed on.

In Britain, where the anti-terror laws were mobilized against Fenians rather than anarchists, the same trading of liberties for control took shape. Suspicions were cast on the Irish as a group, and surveillance justified in the name of protecting the community against terror - a stance that continued through the Troubles, to the end of the twentieth century. It is impossible not to see the parallels with anti-terror laws today, reacting to public fears, and justifying administrative overreach - and the scapegoating of particular immigrant groups. The notion of nationality being contingent, and revocable, creating a sliding scale of rights, challenges our concept of equality under the law, and we can see the faint imprint of anti-anarchist laws even now in policy choices.

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