



ANARCHISM & THE HISTORY OF THE BLACK FLAG

The Black Flag in Anarchist History

Anarchists have used symbolism in their revolt against the State and Capital, not only the black flag, but also the circle-A. Circle-As are spray-painted on walls and under bridges all over the world; punks display them on their jackets and scrawl them into half-dried cement. Black flags have recently been resurrected in Russia and continue to fly in most parts of the world.

There are ample accounts of the use of black flags by Anarchists. Probably the most famous, was Nestor Makhno's partisans during the Russia Revolution. Under the black banner, his army routed a dozen armies and kept a large portion of the Ukraine free from concentrated power for a good couple years. More recently, Parisian students carried black (and red) flags during the massive General Strike of 1968.

But the Anarchists' black flag originated much earlier than this. The first account is actually unknown. It seems that this credit is reserved for Louise Michel, famous participant in the Paris Commune of 1871. According to Anarchist historian George Woodcock, Michel flew the black flag on March 9, 1883, during demonstration of the unemployed in Paris, France. With 500 strong, Michel at the lead and shouting "Bread, work, or lead!", they pillaged three baker's shops before being arrested by the police (Woodcock, pp.284-285). No earlier reports can be found of Anarchists and the black flag.

Not long after, the black symbol made its way to America. Paul Avrich reports that on November 27, 1884, the black flag was displayed in Chicago at an Anarchist demonstration. According to Avrich, August Spies, one of the famous Haymarket martyrs, "noted that this was the first occasion on which [the black flag] had been unfurled on American soil" (Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy*, pp.144-145).

On a more dreary note, February 13, 1921 was the date that marked the end of black flags in Soviet Russia. On that day, Peter Kropotkin's funeral took place in Moscow. Masses of people whose march stretched for miles, carried black banners that read, "Where there is authority there is no freedom" (Avrich, *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, p.26). It seems that black flags didn't appear in Russia until the founding of the Chernoc Zhania ("black banner") movement in 1905. Only two weeks after Kropotkin's funeral march, the Kronstadt rebellion broke out and anarchism was erased from Soviet Russia for good.

While the events above are fairly well known, as has been related, the exact origin of the black flag is not. What is known is that a large number of Anarchist groups in the early 1880s adopted titles associated with Hack.

In July of 1881, the Black International met in London. This was an attempt to reorganize the Anarchist wing of recently dissolved First International. Similarly, there was the Black Band in France (1882) and the Mano Negra (Black Hand) Andalusia, Spain (1883). These dates are immediately followed by Michel's demonstration (1883) and the black flags in Chicago (1884).

Further solidifying this period (circa early 1880s) as the birth of the symbol is the name of a short lived French Anarchist publication: "Le Drapeau Noir" (The Black Flag). According to Roderick Kedward, this Anarchist paper existed for a few years dating sometime before October 1882, when a bomb was thrown into a cafe in Lyons (Kedward, p.35). Backing up this theory, Avrich states that in 1884, the black flag "was the new anarchist emblem" (Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy*, p. 144). In agreement, Murray Bookchin reports that "in later years the Anarchists were to adopt the black flag" when speaking of the Spanish Anarchist movement in June, 1870 (Bookchin, p. 51n1). At that time, Anarchists widely used the red flag. It appears obvious (though not conclusive) that this is the period that the black flag bonded with Anarchism.

Why the Color Black?

It seems that figuring out when the connection was made is easier than finding out why, exactly, black was chosen. The Chicago “Alarm”, which is right from the horses mouth, stated that the black flag is “the fearful symbol of hunger, misery and death” (Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy*, p.144). Bookchin asserts that the black flag is the “symbol of the workers misery and as an expression of their anger and bitterness.” (Bookchin, p. 51n1).

Along these lines, Albert Meltzer maintains that the association between the black flag and working class revolt “originated in Rheims [France] in 1831 (“Work or Death”) in an unemployed demonstration (Meltzer, p.49). In fact he goes on to assert that it was Michel’s action in 1883 that solidified the association. Historically black has been associated with blood — dried blood specifically — like the red flag. The color black was originally adopted as a symbol of all the people murdered by the capitalists while fighting for their freedom.

To this question of the black flag, Howard Ehrlich has a great passage in his book *Reinventing Anarchy, Again*:

“Why is our flag black? Black is a shade of negation. The black flag is the negation of all flags. It is a negation of nationhood which puts the human race against itself and denies the unity of all humankind. Black is a mood of anger and outrage at all the hideous crimes against humanity perpetrated in the name of allegiance to one state or another. It is anger and outrage at the insult to human intelligence implied in the pretenses, hypocrisies, and cheap chicaneries of governments.

“Black is also a color of mourning; the black flag which cancels out the nation also mourns its victims the countless millions murdered in wars, external and internal, to the greater glory and stability of some bloody state. It mourns for those whose labor is robbed (taxed) to pay for the slaughter and oppression of other human beings. It mourns not only the death of the body but the crippling of the spirit under authoritarian and hierarchic systems; it mourns the millions of brain cells blacked out with never a chance to light up the world. It is a color of inconsolable grief.

“But black is also beautiful. It is a color of determination, of resolve, of strength, a color by which all others are clarified and defined. Black is the mysterious surrounding of germination, of fertility the breeding ground of new life which always evolves, renews, refreshes and reproduces itself in darkness The seed hidden in the earth, the strange journey of the sperm, the secret growth of the embryo in the womb all these the blackness surrounds and protects.

The Black & Red Flag

Black and red are the colors of the Anarchist labor movement known as Anarchosyndicalism. The red symbolizing Syndicalism (revolutionary unionism based on the idea of Direct Action) was joined with the black symbolizing Anarchism. Black and red banners first appeared in different configurations around the turn of the century. A flag divided diagonally with a red and black triangle was popular in Spain in the 1930s and is still in use by the Anarchist labor movement today.

The Circle-A

Even harder to track down is the origination of the circle-A as an anarchist symbol. Many think that it started in the 1970s punk movement, but it goes back to a much earlier period. On November 25, 1956, at its foundation in Brussels, the Alliance Ouvrière Anarchiste (AOA) adopted this symbol. Going even further, a BBC documentary on the Spanish Civil War shows an anarchist militia member with a “circle-A” clearly on the back of his helmet. Other than this, there is little known about the circle-A’s origin.

Sources:

- Paul Avrich, *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, Cornell University Press, 1973
- Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy*, Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Murray Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Years 1868-1936*, Harper Colophon Books, 1977.
- Roderick Kedward, *The Anarchists: The Men who Shocked an Era*, American Heritage Press, 1971.
- Albert Meltzer, *The Anarcho-Quiz Book*, Black Flag (organ of the Anarchist Black Cross), 1976.
- George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*, Penguin Books, 1963.