

“Im Anfang war die Tat”¹: Anarchist Ideology in the Russian Revolution

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the often overlooked role that anarchist ideology played in the success of the Bolshevik Party leading up to the Russian Revolution of 1917. As Russia’s Provisional Government, instituted after the fall of its oppressive monarchy, grew increasingly more controlling, radical and socialist ideas pervaded Russia’s political landscape. The communist Bolshevik Party, led by Vladimir Lenin, would utilize this atmosphere of change to kickstart a revolution and create a communist state that would later be known as the Soviet Union. However, there was another forgotten faction that played a significant role in the revolution: the anarchists. Like the Bolsheviks, the anarchists too believed in the necessity of revolution, and in hopes of achieving their shared revolutionary goals, the communists and anarchists formed alliances; however, the anarchists took a far more impulsive, instinctual, and proactive approach than the Bolsheviks. This impulsive mentality manifested in acts of domestic terrorism and armed riots, which were unsupported by the Bolsheviks, yet furthered their goal of revolution. Furthermore, anarchist doctrine influenced the course of the revolution through its impact on Lenin. Lenin praised the Paris Commune, a hallmark of anarchist doctrine, and exemplified anarchist values in his infamous *April Theses*. Through analysis of primary and secondary sources, this paper explores the little known yet crucial role that both the actions and ideology of the anarchists played in spurring along the Bolshevik Revolution.

Russian Anarchism: A Forgotten Influence

In 1949, James Oneal, a prominent leader of the New York Socialist Party, stated that “Moscow does not want the people of the world to know that it is the heir of Mikhail Bakunin, the Russian terrorist, not of Marx.”² The years preceding the Russian Revolution saw a boom in radical, socialist thought and civil unrest. The February Revolution of 1917 and Tsar Nicolas II’s abdication the following month, marking the end of the centuries-long Russian dynasty, was briefly succeeded by a Provisional Government. However, numerous other groups saw this period of change as an opportunity for the upheaval of the status quo and the creation of a new and improved society. When envisioning Russia in the early 20th century, the group that likely comes to mind is the Bolshevik Party, which would go on to establish the USSR, or the Soviet Union. The historical narrative is that the Bolsheviks, following Karl Marx’s communist doctrine, led a workers’ revolution that overthrew the Provisional Government and subsequently attempted to turn Russia into a socialist utopia. However, there is another commonly forgotten—yet incredibly important—faction that greatly affected the course of the revolution: the anarchists. When this era of Russian history is dissected, whether in classrooms or textbooks, anarchist

¹ An aphorism from German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s play *Faust*, which translates to “in the beginning there was the act”.

² Markku Ruotsila, *Communism as Anarchism: The Pro-War Socialists, the Old Guard, and the Forging of Socialist Anticommunism in the United States* (The International History Review 31, 2009), 513.

support for the Bolsheviks is rarely discussed and thus little known, as Russia evidently “does not want” the world to remember the role of this “terrorist” in its history. Such omission, likely a product of the Soviet Union’s erasure of anarchism, is deeply detrimental to one’s understanding of the USSR’s establishment. Though historically omitted from the historical narrative, the anarchist movement, fathered by Mikhail Bakunin, exerted an ideological influence on the Bolsheviks that set the necessary groundwork for the Bolshevik success in the Russian Revolution of 1917.

To better understand the role of anarchism in the Russian Revolution, one must first understand the ideology itself as well as the role of Mikhail Bakunin. Generally, anarchism is the belief that any hierarchical authority should be abolished and that society will function best when stateless. Though he died in 1876, four decades before the culmination of his movement, Bakunin is widely agreed upon as the father of Russian anarchism³. Bakuninism envisions society as a free federation made up of communities in which people may receive resources as a function of need, rather than through large-scale labor and industry⁴. As an individual, Bakunin was impatient, dauntless, and eager for change, and was even imprisoned for radical activity in 1849.⁵ He valued action over thought, and his ideology clearly mirrors this mentality. Anarchism instills in its believers an attitude of spontaneity and impulsivity that lends itself to radical action. Bakunin himself wrote, “no theory, no ready-made system, no book that has ever been written will save the world... I cleave to no system. I am a true seeker.”⁶ His ideology was “purely instinctive” and he believed that Marx’s detailed and exhaustive analysis of socialism would only stifle “the impulse to liberty, the passion for equality, the holy instinct of revolt.”⁷ Thus, Bakunin’s influence was not one of masterful writings and intellect, like Marx’s, but rather a legacy of taking charge and acting on one’s impulses.

Anarchism vs. Bolshevism

Communism and anarchism, two prevalent ideologies circulating in Russia in the early 20th century, were united in their desire for radical action and revolution. As formerly established, when one thinks of revolution in early 20th century Russia, it is usually the Bolsheviks that come to mind. However, communism was not alone in its desire for revolution. Both communism and anarchism desired the destruction of the oppressive tsardom and foresaw that revolution was necessary for positive change to occur. They also both believed in the importance of having a society built upon a strong economic base rather than inside a political, hierarchical superstructure. These intergroup alliances held throughout the upheaval of the coming years, and even played a role in the 1917 Revolution. In the wake of the February Revolution, anarchist and communist coalitions were ecstatic about their recent victory which had resulted in the destruction of the tsarist monarchy. Now, these anarchist and communist groups fixated on yet another common goal—the downfall of the Provisional Government that had replaced the monarchy. These workers’ coalitions and alliances between anarchists and communists continued to work together and influence each other throughout the coming months of 1917.⁸

However, while communism and anarchism certainly shared some socialist ideals and goals, they also had some key, irreconcilable differences in ideology. The Bolsheviks thought a specific manner of economic development was necessary prior to a revolution, whereas anarchists thought it best to just revolt as soon as

³ For the purposes of this essay, the terms “anarchist” and “Bakunist” will be used interchangeably, though there do exist subtle differences between the two.

⁴ Paul Avrich, *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution* (Russian Review 26, no. 4, 1967), 341-342.

⁵ Paul Avrich, *The Legacy of Bakunin* (Russian Review 29, no. 2, 1970), 129, <https://doi.org/10.2307/127358>.

⁶ Avrich, *The Legacy of Bakunin*, 130.

⁷ Avrich, *The Legacy of Bakunin*, 130.

⁸ Avrich, *The Legacy of Bakunin*, 139.

possible. The anarchists focused too heavily on spontaneity and impulsive, instinctive action, whereas the Bolsheviks preferred to think and perfect their ideology. As an example of this fluctuating dynamic, one source describes how “When a Marxist lecturer told an audience of factory workers in Petrograd that the anarchists were disrupting the solidarity of Russian labor, an irate listener shouted, ‘That’s enough! The anarchists are our friends!’” while “A second voice...was heard to mutter, ‘God save us from such friends!’”⁹ This constant back and forth of ideological alliance and conflict laid the groundwork for these two groups preceding the Russian Revolution and proved to ultimately have quite the effect on the revolution itself.

Revolutionary Antecedents

Even before the events of 1917, the aforementioned ideological differences began to manifest themselves in the form of anarchist terrorism, ultimately contributing to the success of the revolutionary effort. Anarchists who particularly resonated with the spontaneous and impulsive attitude took the form of anarchist terrorist groups. 1905 brought the rise of more well-known groups such as “Without Authority,” or the *Beznachalie*, and “The Black Banner,” or the *Chernoe Znamia*. These groups believed in decentralized and locally instigated terrorism rather than terrorism following a figure of authority, and would often use acts of terror against the bourgeoisie with the intention of “fighting philosophy.”¹⁰ One anarchist terrorist said that by attacking innocent and random places, like a cafe, rather than a more relevant target, the anarchists may first “take revenge against the entire bourgeoisie as a class in the name of the other class—the have-nots (*obezdolennye*); second...such an act shows the workers who is guilty for the existence of the present regime, and teaches them how to fight it.”¹¹ The terrorists, who “belittled book-learning and ratiocination, exalted instinct, will, and action as the highest measures of man.”¹² Such “book-learning and ratiocination” are evidently pointed criticisms of the Marxist nature of planning and discussing rather than acting and accomplishing something. Though they shared the same end goal here, which was continuing the momentum of revolutionary activity into a full-fledged revolution, the anarchist terrorists were ultimately the ones who were able to “take revenge” on the “bourgeoisie” and teach the workers “how to fight” back—not the Marxist communists. The manifestation of Bakunin’s impulsivity in terrorist groups was thus quite effective in garnering attention and spreading impetus for the shared revolutionary effort.

Despite Bolshevik disapproval, the impulsive and Bakuninist nature of the anarchists resulted in premature conflict in July of 1917, known as the July Days, that ultimately pushed along the revolution and inspired the Bolshevik Party. The July Days were a tumultuous period of armed fighting and pushback against the Provisional Government by the working class. Following the success of the 1917 February Revolution, the anarchists were extremely impatient and believed they should ride the momentum of their success by instigating another revolution. However, much disagreement arose as the Bolshevik leaders did not believe the time was “ripe” for revolution, and discouraged revolutionary activity.¹³ This notion ties back to that of the communists wanting certain, ideal conditions prior to a revolution. In turn, the anarchists utilized their mentality of impulsivity to fan the flames of revolution even without the consent of Bolshevik leadership. There was a “growing

⁹ Avrich, *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, 345.

¹⁰ Confino, *Organization as Ideology: Dilemmas of the Russian Anarchists*, 205.

¹¹ Michael Confino, *Organization as Ideology: Dilemmas of the Russian Anarchists (1903-1914)* (Russian History 37, no. 3, 2010), 205.

¹² Paul Avrich, *Anarchism and Anti-Intellectualism in Russia* (Journal of the History of Ideas 27, no. 3, 1966), 381, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708592>.

¹³ Leon Trotsky, *The July Days: Preparation and Beginning* (New York: The History of the Russian Revolution 3, 1992), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch24.htm>.

influence of the anarchists, whose chief role so far had been played in the self-constituted revolutionary committee... But even the more disciplined layers of the workers – even broad circles of the party – were beginning to lose patience or at least listen to those who had lost it.”¹⁴ Evidently, the anarchists not only partook in revolts or revolutionary committees throughout July, but also played an ideological role. The more “disciplined” workers, the vast majority of whom were likely communists, displayed characteristics and beliefs that aligned with those of the anarchists and were willing to “listen” to the displeased anarchists, thus helping the revolutionary effort advance. The masses did not “intend to break with the Bolshevik party. But they did feel that the party was irresolute. They wanted to...give the Bolsheviks a little shove...The anarchists poured oil on the fire. But so did some of the new and impatient Bolsheviks.”¹⁵ Again, the Bakuninist and impatient nature of the anarchists undoubtedly can be seen within the Bolshevik ranks too, trying to urge along the revolution and pour “oil on the fire.” Similar to the terrorist acts, the impulsivity of the anarchists created successful progress for the revolutionary effort, and even swayed the Bolsheviks to do the same.

Lenin and the Commune

Furthermore, the anarchist viewpoint in the intellectual debate over the Paris Commune altered the course of the revolution through its impact on Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Party. The Commune exemplified some of the revolutionary and socialist ideas shared by communists and anarchists alike, but was primarily a symbol of the anarchists. The Commune of 1871 was the insurrection of the Paris masses against their National Assembly, resulting in a brief yet nonetheless notable commune state. Many anarchists saw the Paris Commune “as their lodestar, even as they documented its inadequacies and debated tactics.”¹⁶ Although certain “inadequacies” were observed, the Commune and Bakuninism had a somewhat symbiotic relationship, as the two greatly aided and informed one another. Bakunin viewed the Russian peasants “as the basis of a socialist society, to be realized by a movement involving peasants as well as urban workers,” and while no such “movement” occurred in Russia during Bakunin’s lifetime, “the revolutionary insurrections which broke out in France... took the form of independent communes in dozens of towns—including Lyon and Marseille where he was himself involved, and above all Paris itself.”¹⁷ In turn, “the last stage of Bakuninism... was based on a combination of the Russian peasant commune and the French urban commune.”¹⁸ Just as Bakunin partook in and aided the Paris Commune, it in turn was the model for Bakunin’s thinking. For the communists, the Commune was perceived as a momentous yet flawed revolution, and was ultimately not the socialist society to be “realized” as it was in anarchist doctrine. In one of his better known works, “The Civil War in France,” Marx writes, “Workingmen’s Paris, with its Commune, will be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class,” showing his deep respect for the sentiment and workers behind the Commune.¹⁹ However, he later proceeded to say that Paris “was merely an uprising of one city in exceptional circumstances,” while his close friend and fellow communist Friedrich Engels called the Commune the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”²⁰ The anarchists and communists fundamentally disagreed on this key point: the anarchists believed the Commune, despite its flaws, was an intrinsic part of

¹⁴ Trotsky, *The July Days: Preparation and Beginning*.

¹⁵ Trotsky, *The July Days: Preparation and Beginning*.

¹⁶ William Whitham, *Lenin, the Anarchist? A Constructive Misinterpretation* (Kritika 24, no. 4, 2023).

¹⁷ *The Paris Commune: Freedom Anarchist Pamphlet Number 8* (Freedom Press, 1971).

¹⁸ *The Paris Commune: Freedom Anarchist Pamphlet Number 8*

¹⁹ Karl Marx, *The Fall of Paris*, ed. Matthew Caromdy (1871),

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/index.htm>.

²⁰ William, *Lenin, the Anarchist? A Constructive Misinterpretation*.

anarchist doctrine and something to be replicated. The communists admired the spirit behind the Commune, but viewed it as an imperfect system that had only occurred in “exceptional circumstances.”

Lenin held the Paris Commune in high regard and preached that the Commune was something to be respected and imitated, much like Bakunin and the anarchists rather than Marx, thus amplifying anarchist influence on the Bolsheviks. In a speech at the Zurich People’s House, Lenin identified the Commune as the “state we need.”²¹ Furthermore, in his “Plan of a Lecture on the Commune,” he urged revolutionaries to imitate the “practical, successful steps” of the Paris Commune.²² His unwavering support for the Commune when addressing large audiences of Bolsheviks clearly shows how the Commune not only played a role in Lenin’s ideology, but likely the entire Bolshevik ideology. Lenin acknowledged that anarchists “tried to claim precisely the Paris Commune as, so to speak, ‘their own,’ as a corroboration of their doctrines.”²³ Perhaps believing in the strength of the Commune does not strictly make someone an anarchist, but does indicate a certain degree of influence by and agreement with anarchist “doctrines.” After all, despite claiming to be a Marxist, Lenin wished to replicate the Paris Commune to an extent shared by Bakuninists, and boldly voiced these opinions. Furthermore, another source writes that “by 1917, fearful that his fellow revolutionaries were missing a golden opportunity, Lenin used the example of the Paris Commune to urge the immediate seizure of power.”²⁴ The phrase “immediate seizure of power” conveys two essential ideas. Firstly, the word “immediate” reminds the reader of the Bakuninist impulsivity that has already been proven to be associated with anarchist doctrine. Lenin believes that his fellow Bolsheviks are missing their “golden opportunity” for a successful revolution, and must embody the spontaneous, instinctive anarchist mentality to achieve “power”. Secondly, the quote shows the sense of urgency Lenin has in his desire for revolution to occur. Through the anarchist doctrine of the Paris Commune, Lenin is helping the revolution make progress. At its core, the Commune is a model for a stateless and anarchist society. The fact that Lenin not only saw value in the Commune, but used it as an example of why “immediate” revolutionary action should be taken, clearly demonstrates how he enabled the influence of anarchism on the Bolshevik ideology during the early Revolution.

Anarchist Influence on the *April Theses*

Another way in which anarchist ideology impacted the revolution was through Lenin’s radical, anarchist ideas in his *April Theses*. It is first important to acknowledge that while there is an overlap between anarchism and communism in the *Theses*, anarchism is the dominant thought system present. The influence of both groups is visible when Lenin writes, for example, “the power of government [should] pass to the proletariat and the poor sections of the peasantry bordering on the proletariat,” and that “no support must be given to the Provisional Government; the utter falsity of all its promises must be explained.”²⁵ Because Marxism and Bakuninism are intrinsically linked by certain beliefs, delineating in what ways the *Theses* are a product of anarchist thought is necessary. Historians describe some of the enumerated propositions of the *Theses* as having “a distinctly Baku-

²¹ William, *Lenin, the Anarchist? A Constructive Misinterpretation*.

²² Casey Harison, *The Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Revolution of 1905, and the Shifting of the Revolutionary Tradition* (History and Memory 19, no. 2, 2007), 27, <https://doi.org/10.2979/his.2007.19.2.5>.

²³ William, *Lenin, the Anarchist? A Constructive Misinterpretation*.

²⁴ Andy Willimott, *The Paris Commune Taught the Bolsheviks How to Win a Revolution* (Jacobin, 2021), <https://jacobin.com/2021/03/paris-commune-bolsheviks-win-a-revolution>.

²⁵ Vladimir Lenin, *April Theses* (Seventeen Moments in Soviet History, 1917), <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1917-2/april-crisis/april-crisis-texts/april-thesis/>.

nin-ist ring...Indeed, one anarchist leader in Petrograd was convinced that Lenin intended to inaugurate anarchism by ‘withering away the state’ the moment he got hold of it.”²⁶ Here, not just anarchism but specifically Bakuninism can be seen, particularly in the idea of the “withering away of the state,” which is an inherently anarchist ideal. Georgi Plekhanov, a Marxist and contemporary of Lenin, wrote that the *Theses* betrayed Lenin’s “astounding and purely anarchist formula of progress” and that “The pseudo-revolutionary tactics of Lenin are the natural offspring of the pseudo-revolutionary tactics of Bakunin.”²⁷ Though Lenin never referred to himself as an anarchist, and perhaps never fully was one, there is no doubt that his thinking in the *Theses* contains an anarchist “formula of progress” and carries the influence of the anarchists. Interpreting the *Theses* as anarchist would have larger ramifications for the revolution, as many of Lenin’s contemporaries also acknowledged and were influenced by his anarchist writings.

As the anarchist influence in Lenin’s *Theses* was noticed and analyzed by Lenin’s contemporaries, he was thus able to persuasively convey anarchist ideas of impulsive action and revolution to his audience. When reading the *Theses*, “more than a few anarchists found his views sufficiently harmonious with their own to serve as a basis of cooperation.”²⁸ Lenin’s writing is evidently conveying anarchist ideas, in order for anarchists to have “found” Lenin’s thinking “harmonious” with their own and be willing to work alongside him. Furthermore, not only was Lenin pleasing his anarchist audience with his writings, he was creating discourse about anarchism within the Bolsheviks: “The *April Theses*—advocating a ‘commune state’ and the abolition of the army, police, and bureaucracy—met ‘protests and exclamations of outrage’ from Social Democrats [Bolsheviks].”²⁹ There was certainly discord between Lenin and many other Bolsheviks for his anarchist views, further supporting that Lenin was diverging from the Marxist theory he seemed to revere, and instead preaching Bakuninist doctrine on a nation- and party-wide scale. Though “protests and exclamations of outrage” are seemingly negative responses, discourse and debate are unequivocal in spreading a thought or ideology, and undoubtedly enabled Bakuninism to have an impact on Bolshevik ideology. Another source writes that “many anarchists read Lenin’s *April Theses* and *The State and Revolution* through anti-authoritarian lenses...also, Lenin’s attitude against the war ‘was a departure from Marxism.’”³⁰ Lenin’s “departure from Marxism” is significant, as Marx is at the core of Bolshevik ideology. This pivotal moment in Lenin’s thinking undoubtedly caused ripples amongst his fellow communists. In addition, this quote singlehandedly shows the extent of the influence of anarchism in Lenin’s thinking in both the *Theses* and on the Commune, as *The State and Revolution* discusses his thoughts on the Paris Commune. Lenin was undoubtedly the most known and respected Bolshevik leader of his time, and by rhetorically promoting these anarchist ideas, he enabled a far greater and more pervasive anarchist influence on Bolshevism. During some of the most critical months of 1917, Lenin’s radical and anarchist thought was forcing his followers to reevaluate and think critically about revolution and their ideology, undoubtedly altering the Bolshevik ideology before the critical October Revolution.

A New Narrative

Anarchist and Bakuninist ideology manifested itself in the form of radical revolutionary action and Lenin’s own writing and philosophy, thereby aiding the Bolsheviks in their revolution in the early 20th century. These ideological impacts, as well as the revolution itself, culminated in the October Revolution of 1917, during which three critical events took place: the Provisional Government was overthrown in a bloody coup, Lenin and the

²⁶ Avrich, *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, 344.

²⁷ William, *Lenin, the Anarchist? A Constructive Misinterpretation*.

²⁸ Avrich, *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, 344.

²⁹ William, *Lenin, the Anarchist? A Constructive Misinterpretation*.

³⁰ Christos Memos, *Anarchism and Council Communism on the Russian Revolution* (Anarchist Studies, 2012), 22, <https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/anarchiststudies/vol-20-issue-2/article-9279/>.

Bolsheviks seized power, and the anarchist movement was comprehensively eliminated. The anarchists were known to have partaken in the revolutionary action of October; some anarchists even placed themselves in the thick of the action as part of Leon Trotsky's Military Revolutionary Council, the very group that staged the coup.³¹ The anarchists, holding true to their anti-state doctrine, had criticized the Bolsheviks for immediately establishing themselves as a government. The Bolsheviks for their part saw the anarchists as having outgrown their usefulness and were now an unnecessary threat. As a result, just a singular day after the revolution came to an end, on October 26, 1917, the Bolsheviks turned on their anarchist allies. A secret Bolshevik police agency, the Cheka, ensured that "dangerous" anarchists were promptly exiled, arrested, or killed.³² Lenin was rewritten in history—by the Soviet government—as the mastermind who had puppeteered the anarchists with no intention of truly implementing their ideology.³³ Not only were the anarchists completely eliminated, but so too was the memory of their integral role in the Russian Revolution's history. It is no wonder that in today's teaching of the Russian Revolution, the anarchists are so frequently overlooked. History is written by the winners, admittedly, but it is the task of historians to examine not just the winners themselves, but also the hidden forces that have helped the winners find their success.

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³¹ Peter C Mentzel, *Chaos and Utopia: The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution and Civil War* (Independent Review 22, no. 2, 2017), 176.

³² Avrich, *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, 349.

³³ Martin A Miller, *Anarchists in the state: new perspectives on Russian anarchist participation in the Bolshevik government, 1917-1919* (Anarchist Studies 20, no. 2, 2012).

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