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On one anarchist who has forgotten his principles

Luigi Fabbri

In the latest edition of *Vie Ouvriere* to have arrived from Paris, we find a long letter from a Russian comrade, Victor Serge, known in France — where he lived before 1915 — under the pseudonym of Kibaltchitch. He writes from Moscow about the Russian Revolution, living as he is in the middle of it all.

In truth, he has no news to deliver.

His letter is, more than anything else, a polemic against the newspaper *Le Libertaire* which he takes to task for keeping faith with our beliefs, according to which, if we may quote Bakunin's phrase, the authoritarian communists' notion that a revolution can be decreed and organised "either by a dictatorship or by a Constituent Assembly, is quite mistaken". Kibaltchitch thinks otherwise. He has changed his mind and is a supporter of the so-called proletarian revolution.

But as is the policy of every renegade who is, or appears to be, sincere, he deludes himself that he has evolved and reproaches the anarchists who have stayed faithful to their own principles with being traditionalists, of being stick-in-the-muds, whereas anarchism — so he says — is not traditionalist and not static but dynamic. Precisely! But he fails to appreciate

that under the pretext of breaking free from a so-called anarchist tradition, he fails into the orbit of the old statist, authoritarian tradition of the bourgeois socialists, if not directly into the absolutist and militaristic tradition of the *ancien regimes*. He is the very archetype of the anarchist who has moulded anarchy like a beautiful dream of his imagination, because, deep down, he has little faith in it: and as soon as events crop up, in the face of which he is called upon to abide by his own ideas, even should it cause friction, conflict and sacrifices, he promptly scampers off in the opposite direction. And to any who might be surprised by this, he replies:

"One has to march in step with life, and face reality. One has to remain on the terrain of facts." This is precisely the same language employed in 1914 by anarchy's other renegades in their embrace of war-mongering policy, renegades who forgot their own principles and whose assertions were so brilliantly exposed as false by our Malatesta.

Kibaltchitch is a State anarchist (the contradiction between those two words is indicative of his wrongheaded stance) just as Grave and Malato were in 1914: just as the Vanderveldes, Guesdes and Bissolatis were State socialists, except that they were less at odds with their own teachings. just as the interventionists of 1914–1915 used to call us traditionalists and worshippers of words, and argued, as Kibaltchitch does, that one had to revise one's own ideas in the light of the reality of the facts, etc., But just as they were unable to offer anything in place of anarchist ideas other than the empty, deceitful verbiage suitable for bourgeois democrats, so Kibaltchitch too can offer no more details as to how and in what particulars anarchist ideas stand in need of amendment and he simply retreats behind the "phenomenon occurring" in Russia in order to mouth the authoritarian marxist formula about the State being an instrument of revolution.

He, like some other anarchists we know, has failed to understand that the most important part of the anarchist programme

consists, not of some far-off dream, which we would also like to have come true, of a society without masters and no government, but, above all else, of the libertarian notion of revolution, of revolution against the State and not with the State, the notion that freedom is also a means as well as an end, a more appropriate weapon against the old world than the State authority preferred by Kibaltchitch and less of a two-edged sword, a weapon less treacherous than that authority.

Therein lies the whole essence of the anarchist teaching: not sprung all at one stroke, like Minerva from the head of Jupiter, from the mind of one isolated thinker, however gifted: but deduced from the experience of previous revolutions, from contact with which and in the heat of which, after 1794, 1848 and 1871, people like Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin, Arnould, Pisacane and Lefrancais, etc… have drawn the appropriate lessons which the First International largely adopted as its own and which are known today by the generic description of anarchism.

If one denies this revolutionary function of anarchism, one is an anarchist no more. If the whole of anarchism consisted of a distant vision of a Society without government, or of the individual's assertion of self, or of the intellectual and spiritual conundrum of abstract individual perception of lived reality, there would be neither need nor room for an anarchist political or social movement. Were anarchism only an personal ethic for self-improvement, adaptable in material existence to the most widely divergent actions, to movements that would fly in the face of that existence, we might be called "anarchists" whilst belonging to other parties, and the description "anarchist" might be applied to all who, even though intellectually and spiritually liberated, are and remain our enemies in terms of practicalities.

But that is not how we understand it, nor do those who have detected in anarchism, not some means of retreating into an ivory tower, but a revolutionary proletarian movement, an active involvement in the emancipation of the workers,

with equality and freedom alikeas its criteria and its object! Kibaltchitch, who does not accept that object, automatically places himself outside the anarchist family. In order to stay within it, when he reaches conclusions of his own, he implicitly admits that he is neither an anarchist nor an anarchist-communist: he confines himself to the assertion — I am a communist. That comes within an ace of flying false colours, for it is far from certain that, as he contends, communism is of itself anti-State and libertarian in its immediate aims, as soon as they can look upon the State not as some impediment and deviation, but as a weapon against the old world. He deceives himself and deceives us when he seeks to reconcile dictatorial communism with anarchy, since Lenin himself cautioned (in *The Reconstructive Task of the Soviets*) that "anarchism and anarchist syndicalism are irreconcilable with proletarian dictatorship, with socialism, with communism". Socialism and communism in the sense in which Lenin understands them, which is to say, Bolshevism.

Whilst we wait to hear from Kibaltchitch just what this non-traditional anarchism is, we note that his own is more properly described as a non-anarchism. Indeed, he speaks in the most pessimistic manner possible about the Russian anarchist movement which so flourished in 1905, 1906 and 1917–18. "After having done the revolution immeasurable service and afforded it a legion of heroes — he says this Russian anarchist movement has been rent by utter ideological, moral and practical confusion."

That would be depressing news indeed, if we did not know already that all who quit one party for another discover that everything is going from bad to worse in the one they have just left. All renegades see things through the same spectacles! Our reply is that a movement that has been strong enough to do the revolution immeasurable service and provided a legion of heroes cannot be destroyed so easily.

favour of Red Russia if it is to survive!" Certainly! Whether we would say as much if we were in Russia, we cannot tell, but we would certainly make a distinction between the Russia of the People and that of the Government, the official Russia. As we are living in a context of bourgeois rule, opposed to the State and the bourgeoisie hereabouts, we stand unreservedly alongside revolutionary Russia. But that does not imply that we should give ground on the question of dictatorship, on the problem of revolutionary leadership, for the revolution may begin even outside of Russia. Let us defend the Russian revolution against bourgeois vilification: let us cry out to the peoples to rally to its defence against the attacks from capitalist countries, but let us not close our eyes to its errors and let us not be in a hurry to repeat them. Let us not be so seduced by success that we utterly forget our principles.

By remaining above all else anarchists, we will have done our first duty by the Revolution!

"CATILINA" (aka Luigi Fabbri)

It may perhaps have happened in Russia as it has in other revolutions that the burning idealism and revolutionary vigour of the combatants may have paved the way for the ruling party, which later disposed or them, or rather, rid itself of those who proved incapable of accommodating themselves to becoming functionaries of the new government and who were unwilling to forswear expression of their own dissenting ideas. Kibaltchitch might supply us with news of Emma Goldman and let us know if it is true that this courageous woman, who arrived in Russia brimful of faith in and enthusiasm for the revolution, is presently walled up in the prisons in Moscow. Let Kibaltchitch try to get hold of Russian language anarchist papers, and if he can find none, let him tell us why and let us know if it is true that the anarchist press is not allowed under the dictatorship. That would account for the "destruction" of the Russian anarchist movement better than subtle distinctions between traditional and non-traditional anarchisms.

If these be baseless rumours and calumnies, let him deny it — himself or someone else — for it is right that light should be shed on events in Russia, even from the revolutionary point of view, from the point of view of liberty, now that the threat from the Western states has been neutralised and the Moscow government senses victory. For example: is there any truth in reports of compulsory labour in Russian factories, military discipline, extended hours, restricted wages, bans on strikes, etc? It is not important that we should know about steps taken against the bourgeois, reactionaries, nobles, monks, etc.. and we might even endorse those, but the important thing is that we find out what effective freedom is enjoyed by proletarians, revolutionaries, our anarchist comrades: freedom of the press, freedom of association, freedom of thought, freedom of enterprise, etc?

And it is on those counts precisely that we are kept most in the dark.

In his article, Kibaltchitch talks only of the least important matters: intellectual work on Communist Party history, open

air festivals and theatres, etc.. Even the Roman tyrants offered the people "bread and circuses" and it is very true that in Russia there are spectacles aplenty and the news that food supply in Moscow and Petrograd is better than before is a comfort to us too. But Kibaltchitch does not talk to us about what most interests anarchists, precisely because they are anarchists: that is, freedom. And should the reports reaching us from various quarters, and which we have spelled out above, are correct, that would confirm our profound belief that communism without anarchy, communism in its statist form, is the negation of freedom. When Kibaltchitch says that "communism itself in its governmental form guarantees the individual greater well-being, more happiness and more freedom than any other current form of social organisation" he is saying something that, to say the least, still awaits practical substantiation.

As he himself admits, in Russia today, there is none of that. We are well aware that a large part of the reasons why the revolution cannot bring the Russian people greater well-being, comfort and freedom can be put down to the infamous blockade by the capitalist countries, to the war waged against the Soviet Republic by the Entente powers, and to the countless, unspeakable acts of infamy perpetrated against it by the international bourgeoisie. We know ail that, but we are convinced that for some of its afflictions, especially its internal afflictions, the Russian revolution is indebted to its dictatorial character, to its government and those who govern. "This is no time to call it to account for its sins", says Kibaltchitch. Perhaps. But nor should a veil be drawn over mistakes or others be encouraged to repeat them.

What, in essence, would Kibaltchitch like? That even the French anarchists abjure their principles so as to join the communist faction of the Socialist Party, "in order to reduce the dangers of State socialism and combat the influence of power" .Very well, charge! We know from all too great experience that all who have defected from anarchism to authoritarian socialism have ended in the worst reformist-legalitarian and authoritarian hyperbole. The best means of bringing an effective anarchist influence to bear is to stay an anarchist in one's ends as well as in one's means.

But Kibaltchitch says that dictatorship is a means, a weapon, just as much as a revolver. "All violence is dictatorial!" Thus does our Russian ex-comrade indulge in a rather fraudulent play on words. By insulting it, he confuses the violence of the rebel with the violence of the gendarme: the violence of a risen people against that of the oppressor government, the violence of the breaker of shackles, breaking free and freeing others with the violence of the State, not that of the revolution: and although it may claim and hold itself to be revolutionary, dictatorship holds the revolution in check and drives it off course. Rejecting, resisting and lining up with the opposition to that certainly does not amount to "withdrawing from the fray", as Kibaltchitch argues, but instead amounts to prosecuting a different action which is simultaneously more revolutionary and more libertarian.

Kibaltchitch says that, at a time when entire generations are being sacrificed "he has no desire to engage in futile discussion of personal preferences", but the anarchist conception of revolution is not a matter of the preferences of Peter or Paul, nor is it partisan apriorism. It is for the good of the revolution that anarchists are against dictatorship: so that the revolution is not aborted, does not place limits upon its aims, does not mould an organism which would inevitably pave the way for a new form of statist rule, a new ruling class. We fervently hope that that does not happen in Russia. Whilst there is every reason to fear so, and whilst the struggle is even today taking such a heavy toil, and our best comrades are thrown into prison by the bourgeoisie's "Royal Guards", we have no wish to be reduced tomorrow to the sole satisfaction of being tossed into prison by the "Red Guards" of the proletarian dictatorship! And what matters, Kibaltchitch continues, is that we should be "unreservedly in