

Anarchist Black Cross

"We believe, as most Anarchists do, that prisons serve no useful function and should be abolished along with the state. We believe in the abolition of both the prison system and the society which creates it. We believe in direct resistance to achieve a stateless and classless society. We share a commitment to revolutionary Anarchism. We see a real need for Anarchists to be militantly organized."

Extracted from the former ABC website

The Anarchist Black Cross began as the Anarchist Red Cross, a breakaway organization from the Political Red Cross organized to aid political prisoners in Czarist Russia. The year of origin has been a nagging question regarding the history of the Anarchist Black Cross, also known as the Anarchist Red Cross (ARC). According to Rudolph Rocker, once the treasurer for the Anarchist Red Cross in London, the organization was founded during the "hectic period between 1900 and 1905." According to Harry Weinstein, one of the two men who began the organization, it began after his arrest in July or August of 1906. Once released, Weinstein and others provided clothing to anarchists sentenced to exile in Siberia. This was the early stages of the ARC. He continued his efforts in Russia until his arrival in New York in May of 1907.

Once he arrived, he helped to create the New York Anarchist Red Cross. During June and August of 1907, Anarchists and Socialist Revolutionaries gather together in London for two conferences. After this meeting, the Anarchist Red Cross organized in London and in New York. In addition to this information, we do know that members of the organization were on trial in 1906-1907 in Russia.

The Anarchist Red Cross was formed after breaking away from the Political Red Cross (PRC). The PRC was controlled by the Social Democrats and refused to provide support to Anarchist and Social Revolutionary Political Prisoners, despite continued donations from other Anarchists and Social Revolutionaries.

Because of their support for Political Prisoners, members of the group were arrested, tortured and killed by the Tsarist regime. The organization was deemed illegal and membership was reason enough for arrest and imprisonment in Artvisky Prison, one of the worst hard labor jails in Siberia. ARC members and prisoners who managed to escape from prison fled from Russia creating chapters in London, New York, Chicago and other cities in Europe and North America.

Somewhere during the Russian civil war (1917-1922), the group changed its name, dropping "Red Cross" from the title. The 1917 Revolution caused a celebration throughout the Socialist, Anarchist, and Communists communities. The ARC liquidated and members began to make plans to return to Russia in hopes of participating in the new society. Sadly, their return was met by Bolsheviks repression, similar to that of the Tsarist era. After a few years of hibernation, the group was forced to resurface to assist the Political Prisoners in the new Bolshevik society. Once again the organization was made illegal and membership meant imprisonment and/or death.

Makhno's Black Cross

In 1918, Nestor Makhno organized new chapters of the Anarchist Black Cross as an adjunct to his anarchist Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine or Black Army in the territories of Ukraine which they controlled.

The organization's efforts were shifted from prisoner support to emergency medical response and self-defense. With the onset of attacks from Cossacks, White Guards, pogromists, and later the Red Army, the Ukrainian Black Cross took on a unique secondary role preparing city defenses and organizing the first urban army in Ukrainian history. As a city militia, the Ukrainian Anarchist Black Cross worked alongside units of the anarchist Black Army, but were never a mobile force, being primarily based within city environs. Members wore no formal uniforms, but were identified by wearing denim overalls and distinctive armbands. . The Black Cross units in various cities of the Ukraine were for purposes of workers' self defence as well as for purely "ambulance" type activity.

"Most certainly, in a revolutionary situation such as existed in Germany when the Nazis were rising to power, it is highly necessary to have a movement that is able to resist. The mere provocation of the State by protest, when one can only be crushed by the full powers at the disposal of the State, is not enough. It is necessary, when fighting dictatorship, to be able to oppose a monolithic force to it so that it can fight back when attacked.

The Ukrainian "Black Cross" arose out of purely defensive needs, in order to protect workers occupying their places of work, to defend demonstrations in the streets, and so on. Its form of organisation might have been that of the Red Cross (even that of the Salvation Army, as one observer sneered) but it was able to adapt that form of organisation into a fighting force. "

Extracted from the first issue of the Anarchist Black Cross Bulletin, 19th July 1968

For a time, the Anarchist Black Cross was tolerated in Moscow and Petrograd by the Bolshevik government, though its activities in those cities were not large in scale. The Cheka (Lenin's secret police) infiltrated informers into the Black Cross, who regularly made reports on the organization's leaders and activities. Outside of Moscow, Petrograd, and the areas of the Ukraine controlled by the Black Army there was complete repression; anarchist pamphlets and books were regularly seized, and even Anarchist Black Cross aid workers were subject to arrest and detention.

In September 1919, a grenade attack at a meeting of the Moscow Committee of the Bolshevik Party was used as a pretext for mass arrests of anarchists all over Russia by Bolshevik Red Army forces and the Cheka . Anarchist militants were arrested; even the Black Army and its general, Nestor Makhno, was hunted down at the orders of Leon Trotsky, determined to cleanse Russia of all anarchists with "an iron broom". It soon became clear that some kind of anarchist prisoner aid organization would have to be created once again to help anarchists in Bolshevik prisons. In Moscow, Kharkov, Odessa, and many smaller cities new Anarchist Black Cross and similar organizations were formed such as the Society to Help Anarchist Prisoners, devoted mainly to supplying food to anarchists and other dissidents on the left. The work proved difficult, even where food was easy to obtain, as it would often be confiscated by Bolshevik Red guards encountered on the way.

Later years

During the 1960s, the Anarchist Black Cross was reformed in Britain by Stuart Christie and Albert Meltzer with a focus on providing aid for anarchist prisoners in Francisco Franco's Spain. The reason for this was Christie's experience of the fascist regime's jail and the importance of receiving food parcels. At that time there were no international groups acting for Spanish anarchist and Resistance prisoners. The first action of the re-activated group was to bring Miguel Garcia, who Christie met in prison, out of Spain on his release. He went on to act as the group's International secretary, working for the release of others. What was once a typically Russian- Jewish organization, now had many faces and ethnicities.

The organization continued to grow, spreading throughout Europe and North America. In 1995, ABC chapters in the US merged into a Federation- the Anarchist Black Cross Federation. While other formations tried to startup, they were unable to maintain long term support. Around 2001, a new organization, the Anarchist Black Cross Network, began and attempted to present themselves as an alternative to the ABC Federation. A conflict existed until members of both organization sat down at the Break the Chains conference; since then the two groups have tried to develop a working relationship.

