

Notes on the History of Anarchism in literature: a chronology

This is a chronological listing of events in anarchist history which have inspired authors. It's chronological by event, not by dates of writing or publication. It's subject-oriented, not a list of fiction by anarchists (nor in which the odd anarchist character passes through). Nor is it a comprehensive list. Writers are usually drawn to dramatic events (bombs and revolutions) or the familiar historical figures and so miss the everyday agitation that makes up so much of anarchist history. Many events, movements, even whole continents are missing, mainly because it concentrates on literature written in - or translated into - English. Translated works are given two dates: first publication and first English-language publication.

Other pieces chart the recycling of stereotyped anarchists (e.g. *Soho Crackpots* and Nhat Hong's *The Anarchist Beast*). Though utopias, fantasies and alternate worlds do tell us a lot about the world in which they were written, I won't record them here. I'll leave it to others to argue the identifying features of Anarchist fiction.

Meanwhile, here are some of the events from anarchist history which have 'escaped' into fiction.

1848 The year of revolutions (Paris, Dresden, Vienna etc.)

Michael Bakunin (1813-76) fights on the barricades in Dresden with Richard Wagner (1813-83).

Bakunin is apparently the inspiration for Siegfried in *The Ring*. He gets his own novel later: *Bakunin: an invention* (1970, 1977) by Horst Bienek (1930-)

1871 The Paris Commune, a seminal event for the whole socialist movement, generated a whole slew of reportage and fiction including:

The Debacle (published 1892) by Emile Zola (1840-1902) which covers both the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune which followed. Zola also wrote *Germinal*, (1885) a novel of revolt set in the French coal fields. Zola was not a socialist, or a radical, and his Rougon-Macquart series was based on the social Darwinist idea of a heritage of 'tainted blood'. Souvarine, the Anarchist in *Germinal* is yer actual muttering, cloak wearing stereotype (with the difference that he blows up the mine, rather than the mine owners which e.g. Ravachol tried). None of this stopped a generation of anarchists responding to the theme of primal revolt and calling their kids 'Germinal'.

1880s Birth and spread of the European anarchist movement

The Princess Casamassima (1886) by Henry James (1843-1916): Peter Kropotkin (he's the princess) and Johann Most fictionalised, and anarchism sensationally misrepresented. As a reviewer says in the *Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review*: 'To describe and comment upon the actual plot of the novel would be to dignify it quite unjustifiably.'

Richard Whiting in *No 5 John Street* features Dan Chatterton, (as 'old '48') anarchist and publisher of *Chatterton's Atheistic, Communistic, Scorcher*. There's an article on Chatterton in *KSL Bulletin* #11.

1886 Haymarket and the Chicago Martyrs. The trial and judicial murder of the Haymarket defendants for the 'crime' of being anarchists was the subject of many plays within the movement (eg Pietro Gori's *Primo Maggio*, 1895.)

The Bomb, (1908) by Frank Harris (1856-1931): A novel of the Haymarket affair, in which Rudolph Schnaubelt (one of the historical candidates for the bomb-thrower, but probably not) confesses all... Harris conflates the anarchist politics of Louis Lingg (one of the accused) with a his own view of socialism, but the narrative clips along fairly.

1890s

A Girl Among the Anarchists by 'Isobel Meredith' (actually by Olivia & Helen Rossetti) published 1903, reprinted 1993: Not a novel but a fictionalised memoir of their time in the movement editing *The Torch*.

The 1890s were also the decade of ‘Propaganda by the deed’:

Ravachol (François-Claudius Koenigstein, 1859-1892) gave his name to a musical hall song. Marius Jacob (‘Jacob the Burglar’) was the inspiration for Maurice Leblanc’s (1864-1941) character Arsene Lupin (multiple novels, 1907-39).

1894 (February 15) The Greenwich explosion

The Secret Agent (published 1907) by Joseph Conrad (1857-1924): Ironic novel in which your author vents his spleen on revolutionists, recycling and revitalising stereotypes which are still called into service to this day.

1900s, the rise of Anarcho-syndicalism.

How Shall We Bring About The Revolution? (1913) by Emile Pataud and Emile Pouget (1860-1931): syndicalist fiction. Pouget had previously edited *Le Père Peinard* (*Cool Daddy*) 1889-1902, the *Class War* of its time.

1901 Czolgosz assassinates McKinley...

which forms part of Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Assassins*.

1910-1920 The Mexican Revolution

The Jungle Novels, written in German in the 1930s by B. Traven (?1882-1969) comprising *Government* (1931), *The Carreta* (1931), *March to the Monteria* aka *The March to Caobaland* (1933), *The Troza* (1936), *The Rebellion of the Hanged* (1936) and *The General From The Jungle* (1940).

‘No example exists where human beings could be oppressed, muzzled and beaten so long that finally they gave up all thought of resistance or rebellion. The less somebody governing a nation is gifted with brains, the more he attempts to make all resistance impossible by measures of brutal force. Even in the most arbitrary dictatorship imaginable, one fifth of the population remains untouched. And this is precisely is never the worst part of the population. This one fifth of the population, which he, the dictator, has never been able to reach, causes his downfall.’ B. Traven, *The March to Caobaland* aka *The March to the Monteria*.

A chronicle of oppression and rebellion (with more rebellion as the series goes on) showing the course of the Mexican revolution. A mixing of two streams: popular revolt and conscious anarchism (much like the revolution itself).

Traven’s life is a great work of fiction in itself (and the unravelling of it a several volume affair). He declared that a writer should have no biography but his works, partly due to the fact that as a German anarchist involved in the Munich Soviet he was keen to muddy the waters of his past. His other works, including *The Death Ship* (1926, 1934), *Der Wobby* (1926)/ *The Cottonpickers* (1956) and *Treasure of the Sierre Madre* (1927, 1934), are also loaded with libertarian sentiments.

1910-12 The Bonnot Gang

Men in Prison (written in the 1930s, not published until 1967) by Victor Serge (1890-47, born Kibalchich): A fictional account of his time inside (1912-17), having been sent down after the trial of the Bonnot Gang. Serge is an interesting figure, and not only because he’s a very good writer. Some people see him as maintaining a libertarian aspect, even after leaving the anarchist movement (even in his opposition to Stalinism he didn’t fall into hero-worshipping Trotsky, at least.) Others suspect that *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (1951, 1963) skips lightly over the extent to which he was involved in the Bolshevik bloodletting of dissidents before he too started to question the rule of the Party. And some can reprint some of his most anti-anarchist essays of 1919/20, worthy of any chekist, presumably to show us the errors of our ways (*The Revolution in Danger* Redwords, 1997).

Also of interest in terms of anarchist history:

1910-12 *Lost Men (Les Hommes Perdus)*, written in the 1930s): Novel on the Bonnot Gang and Paris anarchist milieu confiscated by the Russian political police when he was expelled in 1936. For a long time impossible to imagine this ever being published, we'd be more than happy to see a photocopy if anyone can get one...

1917 *Birth of our Power*, published 1931: The CNT revolt in Barcelona, again a fictional account of events that he witnessed.

Getting back to the Bonnot Gang, Pino Cacucci has written an account titled *Without a Glimmer of Remorse* (not yet published in English)

1911 The Siege of Sydney Street (made all the more tempting and mysterious by the shadowy 'Peter the Painter'.)

A Death Out Of Season by Emmanuel Litvinoff (1915-), published 1973: fictional account of the Siege, part of a trilogy.

1914-18 The 'War to End Wars'

The Good Soldier Švejk and his Fortunes in the World War (aka *Schweik*) by Jaroslav Hašek (1883-1923), written 1921-23. Shortened English edition 1939, full version 1973: Hašek (an anarchist) shows that if you can't have a general strike to stop war, you can at least make the officers regret that they brought you along.

1917-22 The Russian Revolution. Anarchists were involved in both February and October revolutions but were outmanoeuvred, incarcerated and executed by the Bolsheviks (as were many other workers who threatened the power of the 'workers' vanguard'!) But in the Ukraine, the Anarchist Insurgent Army of Nestor Makhno (1889-1935) lasted longer.

'Discourse on the *Tachanka*' and 'Old man Makhno' by Isaac Babel (1894-1941): Fighting in and writing about the Red Cavalry (title of one of his short story collections, 1926, 1929) you couldn't avoid writing about the *Makhnovschina*, the anarchist insurgents of the Ukraine. However, as a loyal (and sensible, self-preserving) party member, you had to take the piss out of them, so his stories are more useful as examples of fairy tales about anarchists than accounts of the time.

Makhno also turns up in the (also fictitious, but less slanderous) poem 'Makhno's Philosophers' by John Manifold (1915-85) Featured in *KSL: Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library* #9.

1920-27 Framing and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, which like Haymarket in 1886 also generated much fictional comment including:

Boston (written and published 1928) by Upton Sinclair (1878-1968): Sinclair's hot-off-the-press response to the Sacco-Vanzetti case.

1920s Chinese Anarchism

Pa Chin (or Ba Jin: given name Li Feigan/ Kei-kan 1904-2005) was one of China's favourite novelists. He took his name from the first syllable of Bakunin and the last of Kropotkin. He started writing in the 1920s with *Mieh-Wang (Destruction)*. He produced non-fiction, including *The Chicago Tragedy* (1926) and *Past Anarchists* (1931) Works of fiction available in English include *Family* (1931, 1958) and *Cold Nights*. After the communist triumph he was forced to rewrite anarchist characters into 'communist' ones, but he remained true to his anarchist beliefs even through the 'Cultural revolution'.

1927

Fog on the Tolbiac Bridge by Leo Malet (1909-) published 1956: Nestor Burma, everyone's favourite ex-anarchist private detective, is drawn into a case involving old comrades.

1930s 'Hot years' of Spanish Anarchism with regular insurrections leading up to the Spanish revolution of 1936-7.

Seven Red Sundays (1932,1936) by Ramon J. Sender, (1901-82). A tale of insurrection, published in English just before the Spanish workers got their big chance in July 1936.

Lean Men (1934) by Ralph Bates (1899-). Hooray for jolly English chaps from the Comintern who can wean hearty Spanish workers away from silly ideas like anarchism, and when they kill people, have to do it in self defence.

American poet Phillip Levine (1928-) has written poems for Francisco Ferrer, Francisco Ascaso and Buenaventura Durruti. His collections include *Not This Pig* (1968), *Red Dust* (1971), *They Feed The Lion* (1972), *1933* (1974), *On The Edge and Over* (1963/76), *The Names of the Lost* (1976), *7 Years From Somewhere* (1979), *Ashes* (1979), *One For The Rose* (1981), *Off The Map* (1984), *Sweet Will* (1985), *The Simple Truth* (1994), *The Mercy* (1999).

1936 Spanish Revolution

Hugo Dewar has an excellent poem (*Barcelona 1936*) on this:

They too were storming heaven

Do you think they fought in vain?

Red Rose and *The Lover Under Another Name* by Ethel Mannin (1900-84): Emma Goldman (1869-1940, an irresistible subject for novelists, playwrights etc. if ever there was one in the anarchist ranks) is fictionalised by author who also worked with her on aid for Spanish Anarchists during the Spanish revolution and civil war.

The Man Who Killed Durruti, by Pedro de Paz (2003, 2005): historical detective fiction examining the death of the best-known Spanish anarchist militant in Madrid, November 1936.

1960 End of an era in the Spanish anarchist resistance to Franco, with the death of Francisco ‘El Quico’ Sabate (1915-60), almost the last member of the second wave of the resistance to fall.

Killing a Mouse on Sunday by Emric Pressburger (1902-88), published 1961. Filmed as *Behold a Pale Horse*.

Novel loosely based on the life and death of Sabate, legendary anarchist guerrilla. For some reason it includes a sympathetic priest, but it’s easier reading than *Chaos and Night*, (1964) Henry de Montherlant’s (1896-1972) gloomy work on the same theme (last trip of a guerrilla).

1969 Milanese anarchist Guisepppe Pinelli is murdered by Italian police who are busily attempting to pin the blame for neo-fascist/secret service bombings onto the anarchists as part of the ‘strategy of tension’.

Accidental Death of An Anarchist by Dario Fo (1926-) published 1970: Translated into English in 1980, and continually updated to keep topical references sharp, it is now a classic farce. The ‘police version’ of the murder which was ridiculous and not funny has become the peg for humour which will, at best, say those in power can’t be trusted, and at worst tell people how brave they are for listening to someone say it.

1980s

Hard Walls of Ego by Don Bannister (d.1986), published 1987: Downbeat novel of anarchist activity and interpersonal relationships, where an Joe Telford, an anarcho-syndicalist veteran returns to activism and emotional involvement.

Top line (about prison): ‘This is a right unhealthy place, this.’

1990s-

No doubt novelists (and poets and playwrights) will continue to find inspiration in the dramatic events of political revolt, or the small struggles of everyday life. Sometimes the result is readable fiction, sometimes even readable fiction with an understanding of the ideas and actions of anarchists. No doubt a wider trawl (or a couple of months with a typewriter) could extend the list of events covered above.