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Vengeance is Unbecoming of an Anarchist

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This is a story about the ethics of revolutionary violence, from the perspective of historical and potentially contemporary anarchists. I started writing this piece months ago, but then the state of Israel began a genocidal campaign against the Palestinian people. I had no interest in presenting any hot takes on the issue. I have no interest in this piece serving as a take on that issue at all. So I left it alone for months.

It's still something I care about, and something that feels worth discussing, so here it is. A tale of two bombers.

One of the things that fundamentally sets anarchism apart from other revolutionary socialist ideas is our belief that the ends don't justify the means. That is to say: you cannot use tyranny to remove the world of tyranny. You cannot end one oppression by instituting another in its place. The pacifists say that you can't create a world

without violence by using violence, and that might be true, but I'm not a pacifist and the world I envision is not one without violence– just one without oppressive control.

This marriage of the means and the ends was a large part of how we differentiated ourselves from authoritarian socialists. Most notably, of course, it was how we differentiated ourselves from the Bolsheviks that took power in the USSR after turning their guns against all of the other socialist factions, most of which believed in a pluralistic revolution without a dictatorship.

But I'm not here to talk shit on the Bolsheviks, although I admit it's a pastime I enjoy.

I'm here to tell you the story of two anarchist bombers, two men who were pushed to a place where they felt the only way to advance human liberty was to devise something like dynamite and to kill, and to die. Besides that raw motive, and a shared ideological label, they couldn't be more different.

Kurt Wilckens was born in Germany in the 19th century and died in Argentina in the 20th. He spent his political life as a committed Tolstoyan anarchist… that is, a christian and a pacifist. He wasn't afraid of conflict, and he spent his life trying his hardest to do what was right. Poor as fuck, he emigrated to the US when he was 24. There, he worked in the mines in Arizona, joined the Industrial Workers of the World, got arrested alongside more than a thousand other workers, broke free from a prison camp on the border, spent a long time on the run, and was eventually deported back to Germany.

He got right back on a steamer, this time to Buenos Aires in Argentina. He'd heard there was a strong anarchist movement there, and he wanted to be where he was useful. Once in Argentina, he spent most of his time working, getting arrested for his politics, and supporting arrested comrades. In1920, the southern half of

force, "violence" is often used to denote *illegitimate use of force*—anything that interrupts or escapes their control." Only the resisting force is declared violent. Because the brutal repression of workers by the state is not perceived as violence, the thrown bomb at the men who made those decisions will never be seen as self-defense. Because the execution of the bomber is not perceived as violence, the response from that man's comrades is illegitimate.

I don't want to argue "what counts as violence." I don't want to argue "what counts as terrorism." The starving of the poor doesn't count as terrorism, yet the murder of the rich does. I want to look at actions for what they are, devoid of loaded words. Personally, like Malatesta seems to, I want to judge them on their moral qualities. This isn't the only method.

I talked some of this through with a friend while I was preparing this essay, and he said simply: Don't ask "is it violent?" Ask "how does it distribute power?" When I pushed further, he clarified: "how do we destroy the mechanisms that concentrate power and create hierarchies?"

Even in my anger at a man like Émile Henry, who ended someone's life simply for ordering food at a cafe he himself ordered a beer at before he threw his bomb, I have to remember that his actions were aimed–however poorly–against the systems that immiserate the world. It is those systems that I must remain angry at, even if I seek to make sure we don't make the same mistakes again.

the country went into open revolt, with anarchists and indigenous workers striking together at the cattle ranches. Eventually, around 1500 workers were rounded up and summarily executed. Some were forced to dig their own graves. The man responsible for this massacre was named Colonel Varela.

Kurt was a pacifist. That was his whole thing. But 1500 of his comrades is roughly… 1500 too many. Colonel Varela simply had to go, before he killed again. So the pacifist got himself a bomb and a gun and waited across the street from Varela's house in the city. Every day for a week, he watched Varela walk out the door. But each day, Varela had his daughter with him. There is no way that Kurt Wilckens would kill an innocent. He waited. Finally, the 27th of January, 1923, the daughter started coughing. Too sick to accompany her father, she went back inside the house. Kurt Wilckens strode over and threw his bomb at the man who had made his friends and comrades dig their own graves in the deserts of Patagonia.

One version of the story I've heard, another child suddenly appeared and Kurt threw himself between his own bomb and the kid. That might have happened–it certainly would have been in character.

Either way, Kurt and Varela were both injured by the bomb. The Colonel drew his sword, but Kurt drew his gun faster and shot the man dead, then limped slowly away. When the police came for him, Kurt Wilckens handed them his gun and surrendered, too much of a pacifist to even shoot the police.

He was tried and sentenced. It didn't take long. But the state didn't want him behind bars, ready to become a cause célèbre. They wanted him dead. So they helped this other prisoner, a far right asshole, to murder him. Kurt Wilckens died when he was 36 years old. After living and fighting for his ethics on three continents, he died for his ethics too.

That far right assassin was in turn killed by another imprisoned anarchist, because cycles of violence are like that sometimes.

Kurt's story has stuck with me ever since I heard it. The pacifist assassin.

He wrote a letter from prison that laid out exactly what he felt about what he did.

> "It was not vengeance…I did not see Varela as just any old officer. No, in Patagonia he was everything: government, judge, executioner and grave digger. In him I was taking aim at the naked idol of a criminal system. Vengeance is unbecoming of an anarchist. Tomorrow, our tomorrow, has nothing to do with bickering, crimes or lies: it is an affirmation of life, love, and science. We are working to hasten that day's arrival."

Then there's another bomber, another anarchist. For a century, we were mostly known for assassinations. We certainly have done more in history than throw bombs, but of course, we've thrown our share. Sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse, both strategically and ethically.

Émile Henry (whose last name isn't pronounced like the name Henry but instead "ohn-ree," kinda) was a bomber too. He threw his bomb around thirty years before Kurt, in France.

In the 1890s, France was torn by this wild back and forth violence between the state and the anarchists of the working class. More cycle of violence stuff, if I'm being honest, though it's not hard to realize the violence started with the state. The government would murder a bunch of workers, so workers would fight back, so the government would pass draconian laws against political organizing, so an anarchist would bomb some politicians, so the state would pass more laws and execute more people, so more anarchists would throw bombs.

> do as the surgeon who cuts when he must, but avoids inflicting unnecessary suffering: in a word, we must be inspired by the sentiment of love for people, for all people.
>
> It appears to us that the sentiment of love is the moral source, the soul of our program: it appears to us that only by conceiving the revolution as the grand human jubilee, as the liberation and fraternization of all, no matter what class or what party they have belonged to, can our ideal be realized.
>
> […]
>
> Hate does not produce love; we will not renew the world by hate. And the revolution of hate will either fail completely, or else result in a new oppression, which could be called anarchist, as one calls the present governments liberal, but which will not be less an oppression and will not fail to produce the effects which produce all oppression.

We live in a world in which discussions of violence are dangerously oversimplified. I don't say "dangerously" hyperbolically. The oversimplification of our discussions of violence has a body count. One side says "violence is never the answer" and the other side says "well, since that's obviously not true, violence must be fine." When all violence is treated the same, all violence becomes justifiable.

To be honest, I hate arguing about violence. Everyone has their opinions and no one is listening. I have my opinions. I might not be listening.

To quote the anarchist publisher CrimethInc, "When the authorities are perceived to have a monopoly on the legitimate use of

> And this harmful tendency arises also when violence is used for a good end. The love of justice which impelled one to the struggle, amid all the good original intentions, is not sufficient guarantee against the depraving influence exerted by violence on the mind and actions of him who uses it.
>
> […]
>
> The excitement caused by some recent explosions and the admiration for the courage with which the bomb-throwers faced death, sufficed to cause many Anarchists to forget their program, and to enter on a path which is the most absolute negation of all anarchist ideas and sentiments.

In this, he wasn't condemning violence. He was condemning specific forms of it. A few years earlier, in his essay "A Bit of Theory," he wrote:

> We understand that there are some oppressed who, having always been treated by the bourgeois with the most shameful hardness, having always seen that everything was permitted to the strongest, one bright day, when they find themselves for a moment the strongest, say: "Let us also do as the bourgeois do." We understand that it can happen that in the fever of battle some natures […] lose sight of the end to be attained, take violence for the end in itself and allow themselves to be led to savage transports.
>
> But it is one thing to understand and to pardon these acts, and another to claim them as our own. These are not acts that we can accept, encourage, and imitate. We must be resolute and energetic, but we must try never to pass beyond the limit marked by necessity. We must

This is probably where our reputation comes from, one we've never lived down. There are bombs I'm proud we've thrown–I will not mourn the death of Colonel Varela–but it's hard not to wonder where the attention is for the millions of anarchists who organized and fought and loved and invented and wrote and fed the hungry.

Still, during this back and forth period of state versus anarchist violence, for all the bombs that anarchists had thrown, they'd almost never attacked civilians specifically. Before Émile, there'd been only one such attack, in 1893 in Barcelona. Émile caught the idea, though, and on February 12, 1894 in Paris, he threw a bomb into the Café Terminus, a crowded cafe where the rich ate their meals. He killed one person and injured nineteen others.

This specific action was intended as revenge for the execution of another anarchist, Auguste Vaillant, a workingclass man who'd thrown a bomb in the house of parliament because they had executed Ravachol, another workingclass anarchist, who had bombed government officials responsible for the violent repression of a strike.

But Émile Henri didn't target the people directly responsible for the repression, he targeted the rich themselves.

His speech before trial goes hard. He mentions how he'd just become an anarchist recently, and he took credit for a spate of bombings across the city that hadn't targeted civilians. He also said "In the merciless war that we have declared on the bourgeoisie, we ask no mercy. We mete out death and we must face it. For that reason I await your verdict with indifference. I know that mine will not be the last head you will sever. You will add more names to the bloody roll call of our dead."

And most memorably and quotably, he said "there are no innocent among the bourgeoisie."

To me, Émile Henry was a murderer. The social class someone was born into does not justify their death–like the social class Émile Henry was born into. Émile was not only probably the second anarchist to decide it was okay to attack civilians–he was also the first

anarchist bomber who was the child of the aristocracy. I don't think it's a coincidence. To be clear, he was not rich. His father had been an aristocrat whose property had been confiscated by the state as punishment for his role in the Paris Commune, a few decades prior.

I pick two extremes, the pacifist assassin and the man who is often called the first modern terrorist, because their stories intersect superficially in so many ways, yet deviate so dramatically.

My bias is clear. Kurt Wilckens is a hero. Émile Henry is a murderer. Émile is a murderer I have some sympathy for, perhaps hypocritically. His father was cast out from the ranks of the rich for the crime of trying to bring justice to the world, and his comrades were executed around him for the same. We say "eat the rich" often enough, and it would be strange to be mad at someone for taking that literally.

At the end of the day, though, my problem with the rich is that they are rich and they are in positions of power, not that they are alive. I don't seek to kill the billionaires, I seek for them to stop being billionaires. I doubt I would lose sleep over it if someone decided the most efficient way to stop billionaires from being billionaires was to kill them. Perhaps the gordian knot might prove to be a few specific necks.

Yet any love I might have for the symbolism of revolutionary violence is quickly quelled by simply reading the history of that violence. I used to believe that the guillotine was a perfect and beautiful symbol, because I used to believe that people understood the guillotine as a symbol that contained within it its own critique. What started as a tool of emancipation became a tool of terror, and those who first used it soon died upon it.

A few years ago, I was walking through Paris with my host and she took me to the square where the Paris Commune, one of the most beautiful attempts at liberation in European history, burned

the guillotine. Because to the communards, the guillotine was not the symbol of liberation. It was the symbol of oppression. The guillotine is the symbol of "but what if *we* became the oppressors." To me, it's always the symbol of the comforting daydream we ought not linger on, because we know where it leads.

One of my favorite historical anarchists (yes, I have absolutely become one of those people who has favorite historical anarchists. I accept my role as this sort of cliche) was a man named Errico Malatesta. To tie him to Kurt Wilckens, I'll say that Errico Malatesta, fleeing the Italian in the mid 1880s, smuggled himself in a crate of sewing machines to Argentina. Whereupon he helped the nascent bakers union write its organizing tenets–and since this was one of the first and most powerful unions in the country, other unions soon copied it.

It's a flimsy connection to Kurt, who arrived decades later and wasn't, to my knowledge, a baker. I just like the story about being smuggled into the country in a crate of sewing machines.

Malatesta was no pacifist, as he proved time and time again–such as when he and others armed themselves and burned property records in rural Italy to a cheering crowd. He also stubbornly refused to capitulate to the lure of easy answers. He has a piece that I think about a lot, called "Violence as a Social Factor." Since it was published in 1895, it seems likely to me that it was a response to Émile Henry himself,

> Violence [...] is eminently corrupting. It tends, by its very nature, to suffocate the best sentiments of man and to develop all the anti-social qualities: ferocity, hatred, revenge, the spirit of domination and tyranny, contempt of the weak, servility towards the strong.