

History of the Black Flag

Why anarchists fly it, What are its origins?

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The black flag is a symbol of anarchism. Unfortunately, the exact origin of this association is very elusive. This may be frustrating to those fascinated by historical trivia but it is by no means surprising.

Anarchism has always deliberately stood for a broad, and at times, vague political platform. The reasoning is sound; blueprints create rigid dogma and stifle the creative spirit of revolt. Along the same lines and resulting in the same problems, anarchists have rejected the “disciplined” leadership found in many political groupings. The reasoning for this is also sound; leadership based on authority is inherently hierarchical. It seems to follow logically that since anarchists have shied away from anything static, they would also shy away from the importance of symbols and icons.

While this may explain why the origin of anarchist symbols is elusive and inconclusive, the fact is, anarchists have frequently used symbolism in their revolt against the state and capital. Not only the black flag, but also the circle-A are spraypainted on walls and bridges all over the world; punks display them on their jackets and scrawl them on half-dried cement. Black flags have recently been resurrected in Russia and continue to fly in most parts of the world.

There are ample historical accounts of the use of black flags by anarchists. Probably the most famous was Nestor Makhno’s partisans during the Russian Revolution. Under the black banner, his army routed a dozen armies and kept a large portion of the Ukraine free from concentrated power—during 1918 through 1921, until suppressed by the Bolsheviks. During the 1936 through 1939 Spanish Revolution, the anarchist CNT fought under black and black and red banners.

The Black Flag in Anarchist History

But the anarchists’ black flag originated much earlier than this. The first account is actually unknown, but the credit may be reserved for Louise Michel, famous participant in the Paris Commune of 1871. According to anarchist historian George Woodcock, Michel flew the black flag on March 9, 1883, during a demonstration of the unemployed in Paris. Five hundred strong, with Michel at the lead and shouting “Bread, work, or lead!” they pillaged three baker’s shops before being arrested by the police. No earlier reports can be found of anarchists and the black flag.

Not long after, the black symbol made its way to America. Historian Paul Avrich writes that on November 27, 1884, the flag was displayed in Chicago at an anarchist demonstration. According to Avrich, August Spies, one of the famous Haymarket martyrs, “noted that this was the first occasion on which [the black flag] had been unfurled on American soil.”

On a more dreary note, February 13, 1921 was the date marking the end of black flags in Soviet Russia. On that day, Peter Kropotkin’s funeral took place in Moscow. Masses of people, whose march stretched for miles, carried black banners that read, “Where there is authority, there is no freedom.” Black flags didn’t appear in Russia until

the founding of the Chernoe Zhania (“Black Banner”) movement in 1905. Only two weeks after Kropotkin’s funeral march, the Kronstadt rebellion broke out and was crushed by the Bolshevik counter-revolution (see Summer 1994 FE #344). Anarchism was erased from Soviet Russia for good.

As early as the 1880s, a large number of anarchist groups adopted titles associated with black. In July 1881, the Black International met in London. This was an attempt to reorganize the anarchist wing Of the recently dissolved First International. Similarly, there was the Black Band in France (1882) and the Mano Negra (Black Hand) in Andalusia, Spain (1883). These dates are immediately followed by Michel’s demonstration (1883) and the black flags in Chicago (1884).

Further solidifying this period as the birth of the symbol is the name of a short-lived French anarchist publication, *Le Drapeau Noir* (The Black Flag). According to historian Roderick Kedward, this paper existed for a few years beginning sometime before October 1882, when a bomb was thrown into a cafe in Lyons. Backing up this theory, Avrich states in *The Haymarket Tragedy* that in 1884, the black flag “was the new anarchist emblem.” In agreement, Murray Bookchin reports in his history of Spanish anarchism that “in later years, the anarchists were to adopt the black flag” referring to the period around 1870. Up until that time, anarchists, like the communists, widely used the red flag. It appears this is the period when the black flag was bonded with anarchism.

Why the Color Black?

Figuring out when the connection was made is easier than finding out exactly why black was chosen. *The Chicago Alarm*, published by a Haymarket martyr, called the black flag “the fearful symbol of hunger, misery, and death.” Bookchin asserts that the black flag is the “symbol of the workers misery and as an expression of their anger and bitterness.”

Along these lines, the late British anarchist Albert Meltzer (see FE #348, Fall 1996) maintains the association between the black flag and working class revolt “originated in Rheims [France] in 1831 (“Work or Death”) in an unemployed demonstration. But he says it was Michel’s action in 1883 that established the association. However, there are other possibilities.

Black is a very powerful color, or anti-color. The 1880s were a time of extreme anarchist activity. The Black International saw the introduction of “propaganda of the deed” as an anarchist platform. Historically, black has been associated with blood- dried blood specifically-like the red flag. So, while it is tied to working class rebellion, it was also a symbol of the nihilism of the period.

Pirates and Anarchy

There is also an interesting connection between the black flag and pirates. Louise Michel, while leading the women’s battalion during the Paris Commune of 1871, may have flown the skull and crossbones according to one report. But, the association may go further.

Pirates were seen as rebels, as free spirits, as well as ruthless killers. While the internal association of pirate enterprises varied a great deal, many had elected ship captains. In some cases, captains were female, which was highly unusual for the time. He or she was “subject to instant recall,” and life on board a pirate ship was certainly more democratic than life on board ships of the British, American or French navies-let alone a merchant ship.

For pirates, the black flag was a symbol of death, the give-away being a skull and bones on black. It was a sign equivalent with “surrender or die!” It was intended to scare their victims into submitting without a fight.

Other irregulars also adopted the black flag as a warning to “surrender or die!” Quantrell’s Raiders, led by a confederate officer, fought under the black flag during the American Civil War. He was known for showing no mercy to his opponents and expecting none in return. Also, Mexican General Santa Anna flew black flags during his successful siege of the Alamo. Accompanying the black banner, his buglers played, *El Dequello*, a call meaning “no quarter will be given,” in other words, no prisoners would be taken.

While Quantrill and Santa Anna have no connection to anarchism, pirates, on the other hand, are a more complicated situation. They were considered rebels without a state, owing allegiance to no code of law except whatever makeshift rules they improvised for themselves. Certainly pirates were not consciously anarchist, and often acted no better than their statist or commercial adversaries,

but the popular perception of them at the time is what is important. Their symbol was the embodiment of rebellion and the spirit of lawlessness and they were hated and hunted by the ruling class.

This may have been enough for the starving and unemployed to pick up the black flag in revolt. Anyone could quickly get a piece of red or black cloth during a riot or rebellion. Painting a complicated symbol on it took time, so an improvised rebel flag raised in a riot was likely to be of just one color. Hence it follows that the black flag flew without the skull and bones because it was necessarily makeshift.

To this question of the black flag, Howard Ehrlich, in his book *Reinventing Anarchy* has a passage worth quoting at length:

“Why is our flag black? Black is a shade of negation. The black flag is the negation of all flags. It is a negation of nationhood which puts the human race—against itself and denies the unity of all ‘humankind. Black is a mood of anger and outrage at all the hideous crimes against humanity perpetrated in the name of allegiance to one state or another. It is anger and outrage at the insult to human intelligence implied in the pretenses, hypocrisies, and cheap chicaneries of governments.

“Black is also a color of mourning; the black flag which cancels out the nation also mourns its victims, the countless millions murdered in wars, external and internal, to the greater glory and stability of some bloody state. It mourns for those whose labor is robbed (taxed) to pay for the slaughter and oppression of other human beings. It mourns not only the death of the body’ but the crippling of the spirit under authoritarian and hierarchic systems” it mourns the millions of brain cells blacked out with never a chance to light up the world. It is a color of inconsolable grief.

“But black is also beautiful. It is a color of determination, of resolve, of strength, a color by which all others are clarified and defined. Black is the mysterious surrounding of germination, of fertility, the breeding ground of new life which always evolves, renews, refreshes, and reproduces itself in darkness. The seed hidden in the earth, the strange journey of the sperm, the secret growth of the embryo in the womb all these the blackness surrounds and protects.”

The Circle-A

Even harder to track down is the origin of the circle-A as an anarchist symbol. Many think it started in the 1970s punk movement, but it goes back to a much earlier period. A BBC documentary on the Spanish Civil War shows an anarchist militia member with a circle-A clearly inscribed on the back of his helmet. Other than this, there is little known about the origins of the circle-A.

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