

Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist

Review

Nick Medvecky

2004

A review of

Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist, Alexander Berkman, Pittsburgh: Frontier Press, 1970 [available from FE Books, see page 44 for information).

For political organizers, the great worth of Berkman's *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* is the evolution of his political thought during incarceration. He is plunged into the bowels of the beast, stripped of his ultimate sense of worth, yet continuously analyzes his own positions and beliefs.

Berkman finds the "secret of prison survival" is "living for something higher." While recognizing that "he who advances the cause, gives up all," he remains, "not merely a prisoner, but the representative of a movement." Berkman lived out that example in his prison experience.

In a remarkably mature departure, given his own "crime," he reacted negatively to the 1901 assassination of President William McKinley by another anarchist (one associated by the press with Emma Goldman). He disagrees with the "social value" of this "propaganda of the deed" to the workers' movements despite McKinley's clear role as the leading representative of America's newly established imperialism.

And this comes despite Berkman's personal frustration at the pace of change and the injustice and brutalities against workers and their families. This served to increase his feeling of his "revolutionary duty to take the part of the persecuted" and a further commitment to the need to organize in concert with others searching for that "hour of sanity [when] the torch of liberty would flame 'round the world."

In an engaging style, Berkman's journal tells the reader how "day succeeds night in a progression of years ...death versus time." He shows how a profit oriented society "converted mankind to wolves and sheep...a political mastery based on violence." Ultimately, prison is only "an intensified replica of the world beyond." Indeed, true "minimum security" is what lies beyond the serpentine coils of razor wire—and labeled "freedom."

Berkman documents how prison labor was designed to "dull consciousness." As another famous anarchist Peter Kropotkin explained some years earlier in Paris, prison labor is "the work of the slave which degrades" ("Prisons and Their Moral Influence on Prisoners," FE, Winter 1992).

After 15 years, Berkman was released from prison in 1906. He found that he was surprisingly unprepared for the return to outside life.

However, Berkman soon resumed his anarchist activities with Emma Goldman. They were sentenced to prison in 1917 for their activities against the military draft and were eventually deported to Russia in 1919. Both later wrote works documenting their disillusionment with "Bolshevik socialism" and remained committed anarchists throughout their lives.

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Our reviewer has served 14 years in the federal system, formerly did a sentence on a Tennessee rock-quarry chain-gang, time in an army stockade, and brief to not-so-brief incarcerations in Detroit, New York, Idaho, Washington, Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, Mexico, Colombia, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Uganda—all more or less politically connected.

We are already in the earliest stages of planning a special issue on prisons for 2005.

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