

The Haymarket Martyrs Guilty...So What?

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In Chicago's Haymarket Square on the night of May 4, 1886, a dynamite bomb was thrown at a squadron of police during a rally of striking workers. The bomb blast and ensuing gunfire resulted in the deaths of police officers and workers. Eight anarchists were tried for murder and found guilty although the prosecution conceded none of the defendants had thrown the bomb. Four of the men were executed.

The innocence of the convicted men and the unfairness of their trial has been the subject of many accounts. Timothy Messer-Kruse examines the evidence and emerges with a different, but more radical conclusion.

On May 3, 1998, a group of labor activists, trade union officials, and a representative of the National Park Service, stood solemnly in Chicago's Forest Home Cemetery. They gathered on the Sunday following labor's most sacred date, May 1, International Workers Day, to dedicate a memorial to the five Chicago anarchist working-class revolutionaries executed for their part in the 1886 bombing at Haymarket Square which killed seven police.

At their feet a squat brass plaque read:

"Haymarket Martyrs' Monument has been designated a National Historic Landmark. This monument represents the labor movement's struggle for workers' rights and possesses national significance in commemorating the history of the United States of America. 1997. National Park Service. United States Department of the Interior."

There is a bitter irony in the government memorializing the burial places of the five men it murdered. But there is a greater injustice in its softening their beliefs into a generic longing for "workers' rights." This National Historic Landmark is a bronze insult to the memory of these men because by remembering them as innocent victims of a biased judge and jury their true sacrifice and commitment is conveniently forgotten.

Albert Parsons, August Spies, George Engel, Adolph Fischer, and Louis Lingg were not martyrs because they were murdered by the state of Illinois. They were martyrs because they dared to foment a workers' insurrection in the heartland of industrial America. In short, they were guilty as charged, guilty of conspiring to kill police, guilty of being revolutionaries.

For at least half a century, to question the innocence of the Haymarket martyrs has been an act of heresy. Since the early 20th century, progressive scholars have tried to embrace the martyrs' fiery rhetoric and radical beliefs but deny their actions.

Floyd Dell in 1902 famously squared this circle by theorizing that the Chicago anarchists only collected and flourished bombs as a form of propaganda, as a tactic to call attention to their social ideas.

Ever since then, historians, perhaps reflecting their own academic existence, have happily explored the anarchists' writings and pronouncements as if these were totally theoretical and insincere, meant to shock the bourgeoisie rather than rally the working class. In this way the martyrs' legal innocence and victimhood has been preserved at the cost of their implicit condemnation as hypocrites and cowards.

Liberal-minded academic historians who have written about Haymarket have simply not questioned the reigning interpretations and have recycled the same unexamined claims about the case and uncritically drafted their narratives on the same assumptions.

They take no notice of the fact that Louis Lingg and his lawyers never disputed the fact that he manufactured bombs in his apartment, including a flurry of bomb-making just hours before the Haymarket riot. No historian has recorded that August Spies admitted on the witness stand that he kept dynamite and bombs in his editorial office.

Few of the books on the Haymarket bombing and trial mention how George Engel and Albert Parsons attempted to place bulk orders for large caliber Remington revolvers from a gun dealer a couple of months before May, Engel inquiring about purchasing one hundred, Parsons wanting forty or fifty. None mention the testimony of Luther Moulton of Grand Rapids, Michigan, who recounted that Spies told him a year earlier of his plans to “take the city” by force “when the working men attempted to introduce the eight-hour system of labor.”

Historians pretend that some great mystery surrounds the identity of the bomber, repeating baseless rumors that the bomb may have been the work of an agent provocateur or the act of a lone worker, disconnected to the anarchist movement. Such speculation was never even supported by those closest to the Chicago anarchists.

Dyer Lum, who took over the Alarm when Albert Parsons went on trial and was a regular visitor of the defendants in Cook County jail, wrote in 1891 that the bomber was indeed an anarchist, though he chose not to name him. Emma Goldman told one of her lovers that she also had heard the bomb-thrower was an anarchist.

The man who threw the bomb

In fact, there is little mystery about the bomber’s identity. The overwhelming weight of evidence bears down on one man—Rudolph Schnaubelt, defendant Michael Schwab’s brother-in-law. In the courtroom, Schnaubelt was identified by two eye witnesses as the man who threw the bomb.

Decades later the son of Dr. Ernst Schmidt, head of the anarchist’s legal defense committee, revealed that his late father had told him that Schnaubelt was in fact the bomber. George Schilling, the labor leader who had the closest friendship with many of the Chicago anarchists, late in his life confided in a young librarian, Agnes Ingles, who was collecting anarchist papers for the University of Michigan Labadie Collection, that Schnaubelt “did the job.” Oscar Neebe, who served seven years in Joliet prison for his small role in the bombing conspiracy, late in life reportedly told a friend and neighbor that he believed Schnaubelt was the bomber.

More importantly, historians’ ongoing fixation on the identity of the bomber and the fact that the bomber was never prosecuted, has only served to cloud the most important historical fact of this entire episode. What they so conveniently downplay is that the bombing was the culminating moment of a radical group that actually dared to plan and stage a violent insurrection against the capitalist state.

The state’s attorney called this a conspiracy to murder and succeeded in hanging four men (and pushing Louis Lingg to suicide) upon the charge. As repressive as such a prosecution was, its underlying logic was sound. The Chicago anarchists had conspired to kill police that night, though murder was not their object, only in their minds a necessary action to liberate the working class.

When historians discuss the conspiracy that led to the Haymarket meeting and bombing, they focus all their attention on a secret meeting held in the basement of Grief’s Saloon on Monday, May 3, the evening after the bloody riot at the McCormick Reaper Factory and the night before the Haymarket meeting.

The plans discussed at that meeting—to muster their militia companies and fight police—are then dismissed as the idle talk of men angry and reacting to the recent confrontation with the cops.

In this way, the explosion at Haymarket is portrayed as the result of a succession of steps in a chain of unfortunate and unforeseen occurrences and not as part of a larger strategy to radicalize trade unions and use them to provoke violent confrontations with agents of the state and ultimately spark a general insurrection.

Throughout the weeks leading up to the great eight-hour strike of the first of May, 1886, those unions that anarchists had succeeded in leading showed little actual interest in winning the eight-hour day. When bosses would concede the eight-hour day, the anarchist-led unions would demand higher pay. If offered higher pay, they demanded higher pay and shorter hours. When one firm offered both a shorter day and higher wages, the union’s anarchist leaders demanded that the company shut down its plant in Cincinnati and move the production to Chicago.

Intransigence makes no sense

The anarchists’ focus on provoking confrontation over winning incremental reforms was evident at the central flashpoint of the May Day weekend, the sprawling McCormick Reaper Works. Over the previous year anarchists had gained a toehold in the McCormick plant but had failed to take control of all the unions representing workers in the factory.

All the unions were severely weakened by a failed strike in March 1886 and by the first of May, the rank and file workers returned to the plant and the most militant leaders had been fired.

Cyrus McCormick, Jr., owner of the Reaper Works, locked-out his workers on Saturday, May 1, as the strike wave began but, eager to avoid inflaming the situation the following Monday when his factory was scheduled to reopen, announced that he was granting his employees the eight-hour day. From a trade-union perspective, McCormick's factory was no longer an issue, but the anarchist leadership targeted it nonetheless.

Such intransigence makes no sense if the Chicago anarchists were, as the federal government's plaque claims, advocates for "worker's rights." But it all makes one coherent picture when their own writings, speeches, and plans are believed. A meeting that preceded all the many skirmishes with police that weekend reveals the deeper nature of their intentions.

The armed wings of Chicago's most militant groups gathered at a small hall on Sunday morning, May 2. George Engel and Adolph Fischer led the meeting as they would the next night when a larger meeting of armed groups was held in the Grief's cellar. The plan that Engel proposed that peaceful morning was one intended not to win a strike or pressure bosses to grant the eight-hour day, but was only conceivable if the goal was a revolutionary take-over of the city.

According to one attendee at that meeting who testified for the state, Engel's plan was for "as soon as it came to a conflict between the police and the Northwestern Groups, that bombs should be thrown into the police stations and the rifle men of the Lehr and Wehr Verein should post themselves in line in a certain distance and whoever would come out should be shot down...then it should proceed in that way until we would come to the heart of the city."

This was not idle talk, but a plan repeated and reconfirmed the following night among a group of radicals who regularly met in secret and drilled with Springfield rifles and tested homemade bombs on the prairie outside the city. Adolph Fischer, who attended both meetings, would have had a unique perspective on what to us today must sound like a fantastic and far-fetched idea: that a small radical group could take over an entire city.

The possibility of revolution

Fischer's older brother had been one of the leaders of the mass strikes that swept the nation in 1877. The older Fischer, and probably Adolph as well, lived in St. Louis at the time and briefly succeeded in wresting control of the city from the authorities in a movement people at the time compared to the Paris Commune. To Fischer and many other radicals of his generation, Engel's plan to forcibly take over the city did not sound impossible or even far fetched, as he had once personally glimpsed the possibility of revolution.

The thirty or so men who sat on wooden benches lined up in rows on the dirt cellar floor of Grief's saloon combined Engel's plan to attack police stations with preparations for a mass rally. They agreed upon a secret code, the word "ruhe," to be published in specific box in Spies' anarchist daily if and when "the revolution" broke out. Upon seeing that signal, the armed militias were to muster at their designated spots and scouts were to be sent to the meeting at the Haymarket and if a riot should break out, they were to attack according to plan.

The next day Spies' paper printed the signal and the die was cast. That evening the fateful Haymarket meeting took place and every detail of it was unusual. It was held in a place where the anarchists had never held a mass-meeting before. A place that was selected because the usual place anarchists held their protests, Market Square, was described by Fischer as "a mousetrap" because it backed up to the river.

It was held in the area of the Haymarket square with the most intersecting alleyways and just one block away from the police station led by the most hated police officer in the city, Inspector John Bonfield. One version of the famous handbill announcing the meeting told workers to, "Arm yourselves and Appear in Full Force." The meeting started nearly an hour later than the scheduled time.

Just before the meeting commenced, Louis Lingg carried a heavy satchel filled with bombs to a saloon that was a customary meeting place for the Northwest side group and men helped themselves to its contents. One anarchist witness uncooperatively testifying for the state slipped when asked if he knew there would be trouble at the Haymarket meeting and replied, "I knew that much that when the police should come to attack the workingmen that each one should help themselves the best way they could."

All these plans were entirely consistent with what the anarchists themselves had been advocating for years. They distinguished themselves by their absolute rejection of incremental reformism, of business unionism, and of electoral politics.

The anarchist manifesto Parsons and Spies helped to draft in Pittsburgh in 1883 was not idle talk, but a map of their intentions. When the delegates in Pittsburgh declared that, "The work of peaceful education and revolutionary conspiracy well can and ought to run in parallel lines," they described exactly the dual efforts of the Chicago revolutionaries who published newspapers, led marches, sang songs, bored deeply into existing unions in an effort to transform them, and also stockpiled guns and bombs.

When the Pittsburgh Manifesto declared: "all attempts in the past to reform this monstrous system by peaceable means, such as the ballot, have been futile, and all such efforts in the future must necessarily be so...there remains but one recourse—force!" they weren't merely theorizing.

The outcome was tragic. A phalanx of cops one hundred and sixty strong marched up from their nearby station and ordered the meeting to disperse. A single powerful bomb was thrown, later proven by one of the first uses of chemical forensic evidence used in an American courtroom, to have been made by Lingg.

Moments after the explosion, the police exchanged gunfire with some in the crowd of workers, scattering the revolutionaries, and leaving three of them dead or dying. Besides Mathias Degan who died on the spot, six other officers were mortally injured and sixty wounded, most by the bomb, but some by bullets of a variety of calibers. The battle the anarchists began was not only lost, but the entire labor movement was set back by a tremendous public backlash.

From a radical perspective, it should not be surprising that the trial of these eight radicals fell far below even modern liberal standards of justice. Of course, the police searched homes and seized evidence without warrant. Of course, scores of suspects were dragooned into the station house jail cells and held for days incommunicado. Of course, jurors were hand-picked by court bailiffs. Of course, stands of flags and banners with revolutionary mottoes and bombs and pistols by the basketfull were carried into the courtroom in a transparent effort to highlight for the jurors the peril the defendants posed.

What historians fail to point out is that all of these maneuvers were completely within the bounds of law and standard procedure of that benighted time. To charge, as historians have repeatedly done, that prosecutors bent the rules to gain the conviction of these particular revolutionaries obscures the more important point: that the deck was heavily stacked in favor of the state in every criminal prosecution.

Chicago's leading anarchists and revolutionaries were martyred on November 11, 1887. They sacrificed their lives in a miscalculated attempt to live up to their own revolutionary ideas. A century and a quarter later our debt to them is to stop denying their true significance and place in history.

Timothy Messer-Kruse is the author of two forthcoming books reexamining the Haymarket episode. *The Trial of the Haymarket Anarchists: Terrorism and Justice in the Gilded Age* will be published in August by Palgrave Macmillan. *The Haymarket Conspiracy: Transatlantic Anarchists Networks* is due out from the University of Illinois later this year.

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