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Anarchism

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Anarchism is a belief system that opposes the forces of the state. Anarchists oppose war, as well as the structures that create conditions for war, and anarchist practices that seek to undermine the control of the state can be both nonviolent and violent. This entry will explore anarchism as a political and social framework, highlighting anarchism and anarchist positions in relation to war, and will go on to discuss some of the well-known, influential figures of anarchism and the emergence of and difference between anarchist pacifism and anarchist militias.

Anarchism as a Framework

Anarchism as a critical framework and political movement seeks to create a world based around the principals of voluntary association, mutual aid, equality, and freedom and is primarily opposed to the state, capitalism, and all manifestations of hierarchy, domination, and coercion. As a result, anarchists have typically opposed war and, instead, agitated for individuals to resist state militarism, even if the same individuals support violent revolutionary change.

Anarchist rhetoric includes such charges as, “No war but the class war,” or similarly, “No war between nations; no peace between classes.” These two slogans encompass a common anarchist duality: Interstate war is to be opposed, and conflict with the state and capital is to be encouraged. For anarchists, nation-state war is the furtherance of ruling-class interests at the expense of working-class bloodshed, and as such, it is understood to be an exploitative endeavor for the benefit of the political and economic interests of the elite. Thus, when discussing anarchism and war, it is important to distinguish between those who oppose war and militarism, and those who oppose violence wholesale (i.e., pacifists). To further complicate matters, anarchists opposed to war (i.e., antimilitarists) may not be opposed to other forms of violence, for example, worker-led revolutions or armed resistance to dictatorial regimes. Finally, anarchism, as a decentralized movement of movements, is far from ideologically homogeneous, and among the globally dispersed milieu, constitutes a wealth of ideas, critiques, and perspectives. Therefore, while one can speak in generalities, it is important to remember that just as anarchism does not speak *for* the subjugated and oppressed, any explanation purporting to explain “what anarchism says about *x*” will inherently be shortsighted and not fully inclusive.

Structural Violence and War

A common anarchist assertion is that structural violence—such as that exhibited in poverty, nationalism, ethnocentrism, and patriarchy—is the root cause of social ills, including nation-state war. The anarchist critique of structural violence is centered on a preference for mutual aid over competition, voluntary association over coercion, and autonomy over centralization. Though anarchists are not typically seeking to replace the *system* of democracy, monarchy, or liberalism with the *system* of anarchy, there is still a great deal of revolutionary prefiguration contained in their critique. For example, an anarchist vision for society would not be based around the patriotic anthropomorphizing of the state or the mobilization of human will through jingoism and a fear of outsiders. In other words, by opposing the state and the trappings of statehood, anarchism opposes the forces that create the conditions for war while opposing war itself.

Furthermore, anarchists contend that since it is structural inequality, hierarchy, and violent

coercion that create society's troubles (including war), by removing these conditions, one can alter society at the structural level. For example, if one were to create an egalitarian system of distributed resource sharing, thus eliminating poverty, this would serve to greatly reduce or eliminate need-based crime and class divisions. Additionally, if one were to dismantle the complex notions of racism, ethnocentrism and xenophobia, one could prevent ethnic cleansing, genocides, and other forms of interstate, ethnoterritorial war. Therefore, while structural inequality and violence creates war, a revolutionary re-visioning of society beyond these structures would prevent war from occurring by removing its causes.

Finally, anarchism can be understood as an inherently utopian vision for society. In this vision, society organized outside of the state and capitalism would be replaced by horizontal methods of power sharing and resource communization. This society would be based around the ethics of nonviolence, equality, volunteerism, and direct democracy. In effect, by removing the state's tendency to foster violent inequality, one removes the causes of war. An anarchist society—if such a thing can be spoken of—would be based around notions of love, respect, cooperation, and engagement. The abolition of war would be a likely result.

Anarchist Pacifism

Pacifism—and specifically anarcho-pacifism—has played an important role in critiques of war, conflict, and systemic violence. Most notably, the tendency has linkages to the work of Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), and Dorothy Day (1897–1980), among others. Throughout the anticolonial struggle of the 20th century, anarcho-pacifism drew influence from the struggles of Mohandas Gandhi. During the social upheaval of the African American civil rights movement (ca. 1955–1968), anarcho-pacifists such as Paul Goodman (1911–1972) helped to infuse nonviolent, antistatist politics into the struggle for racial equality and the resulting New Left movements that emerged in opposition to the Vietnam War.

Anarchism in the 19th century was often associated with violent strikes against the state, termed *propaganda of the deed*, and coordinated actions by labor unions. While these internationalist tendencies were highly visible, other anarchists, like Tolstoy, opposed the use of violent means for social change. For Tolstoy and other anarcho-pacifists, anarchism, at its heart, is noncoercive, and thus, to utilize violence is contrary to its political praxis, as violence is the employment of directly coercive means. Anti-interventionist, Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta (1853–1932) said, “The main plank of anarchism is the removal of violence from human relations.”

In the modern context, anarchist pacifists include activist trainer Starhawk (b. 1951), peace educator Colman McCarthy (b. 1938), and author Ursula Le Guin (b. 1929). Early pacifists, such as Thoreau, encouraged active resistance to militarism, including not paying taxes, not serving in the military, and linking moral responsibility to resistance to violence. In other words, Thoreau argued that individuals have a moral and hence political obligation to resist efforts by the state to involve them in violence through institutions such as the military and the economy. This logic of morally driven civil disobedience would greatly influence later practitioners of nonviolent resistance such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Later anarcho-pacifists, such as McCarthy, have argued that conflict is furthered by the society's refusal to *teach* peace and that through peace education and a critique of systems of violence—such as animal consumption, capital punishment, and abortion—peace can be achieved.

World War I: The Great Anarchist Debate

While the anarchist position is often spoken of as decidedly antiwar, with some pacifist tendencies, these positions have, at times, met resistance. Throughout its long and diverse history, the clearest moment of such division was during World War I. At the time of the First World War (1914–1918), anarchist opinion was divided between those favoring interventionism (i.e., involvement in the war) and their critics. The Dutch anarchist Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis (1836–1919) was a strong antiwar and antimilitarist organizer. At the Second International (1891), he proposed coordinating a general labor strike as a collectivist response in the event of war. He founded the Anti-Militarist International (1904) and actively opposed World War I, leading demonstrations and opposing conscription.

While Errico Malatesta and Nieuwenhuis opposed involvement in the war, others, such as Russian thinker Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), supported it. This has led some anarchist historians to classify Kropotkin's support for foreign intervention as "non/anti-anarchist," or at the minimum, representative of a minority position among the anarchist thinkers of the time. In 1915, Nieuwenhuis signed the international anarchist manifesto against the war, aligning with Malatesta and opposing Kropotkin. In 1916, Kropotkin and fellow anarchist Jean Grave (1854–1939), in conjunction with pro-interventionist anarchist allies, issued the *Manifesto of the Sixteen*, rebuking the antiwar, anarchist position. The document advocated for an Allied (France, Britain, and Russia) victory over the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria) and, furthermore, for anarchists to support Allied efforts. In brief, Kropotkin's position, as articulated in the manifesto, stated that supporting Allied efforts was an act of political resistance confronting the aggression of the German empire, and as such, to defeat Germany and its supporters would help to overthrow the power elite and usher in the liberation of Europe.

Throughout the World War I period, anarchist involvement in anticonscription movements was prominent and often coordinated cooperatively with other portions of the left, including sectarian and statist elements. These efforts included such notable figures as Rose Abbott, Stella Ballantine, Alexander Berkman, Eleanor Fitzgerald, Emma Goldman, and Rudolf Rocker, all of whom were involved in the No Conscription League. These antimilitarist positions—with their implicit critique of capitalism and the state—would help to galvanize state efforts to isolate, demonize, and eventually deport those portrayed as "foreign agitators." According to Peter Ryley's historical review of anarchist positions during World War I, three main "anti-war tropes" encompassed the arguments of the time and can be summarized as follows: (1) pacifist rejection of war and the consequent embrace of nonviolent strategies for sociopolitical revolution; (2) antistatist rejection of war, portraying collectivist violence as a product of centralized militarism; and (3) socialist pacifism, which understands war as an imperialist endeavor benefiting ruling-class capital at the expense of proletarian bloodshed. All three of these positions understand violent nationalism, militarism, and state-directed warfare as contrary to a utopian re-visioning, and thus, while anarchist critiques of war diverged among adherents, its core rejection was largely consistent.

Anarchist Militants and Militias

A notable exception to the anarchist rejection of war was the anarchist army of Nestor Makhno (1888–1934), who helped lead anarchist forces in the Ukraine during the Russian Civil War (1917–1922). Makhno led the Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine, also known as the Makhnovshchina, or Black Army. These anarcho-fighters used guerrilla warfare tactics to repel traditional armed forces—including the Hetmanate Republic, Ukrainian Nationalists, occupation forces of Germany and Austria-Hungary, the Bolshevik Red Army, and the anti-

Bolshevik White Army—from southern Ukraine. The Black Army helped to foster and protect the so-called “free soviets” and create an anarchist-styled society outside of the state. Makhno’s forces were famed for their use of heavy machine guns mounted upon horse-drawn trailers and their Robin Hood–styled raids on large, landowning estates, redistributing capital among the peasantry. The Black Army seized weapons from retreating forces and used these to organize traditional military units (e.g., infantry, artillery, and cavalry). Though the formations resembled traditional militaries, Makhno’s forces were democratically organized into militias directed by committees and council assemblies. Officers were elected and able to be recalled. The army would host educational gatherings to discuss revolutionary policy, acting as a model for Spanish militias of the 1930s. Though exact figures are difficult to establish, Makhno’s anarchist forces may have numbered as high as 110,000.

A complementary counterexample to anarchists’ avoidance of war was their involvement in the Spanish Revolution (i.e., Spanish Civil War) of the 1930s, both in support of the workers’ militias and in opposition to the fascism of Francisco Franco (1892–1975). The Spanish Civil War contained within itself the Spanish Revolution—a period of revolutionary anarchist and libertarian sociolabor organizing embedded in the fight against fascism. Anarchist support for the Spanish militias was due not only to the leftist praxis of the fighters but also the nature of the war—one of internal division and management, not interstate conflict over borders and resources. Anarchist involvement in the Spanish Civil War is most clearly linked to the workers’ militias of the National Confederation of Labor–Iberian Anarchist Federation (CNT-FAI) and the period of 1936–1939. The CNT-FAI is an anarcho-syndicalist (i.e., industrial unionism utilizing direct-action solidarity) workers’ union begun in Catalonia in 1910. The forces of the CNT-FAI, in conjunction with Marxist unions (such as the Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification, known as the POUM), fought Spanish Nationalist/Francoist forces through the unit of the workers’ militia. The CNT-FAI anarchist-modeled militias raised state-controlled arsenals, self-trained fighters, and dispatched in unions across the Spanish state. The fighting units had no system of hierarchy, forgoing ranks and salutes, as fighters freely elected commanders.

The Spanish Civil War and the fighting units of the CNT-FAI showcased a tendency toward armed resistance and away from pacifism, best embodied in the life of José Buenaventura Durruti Dumange (1896–1936), better known as simply Durruti. Durruti was a CNT-FAI militant active during the war. Prior to the war, he served as an organizer for the CNT as well as Los Justicieros (The Avengers), who attempted to assassinate King Alfonso XIII in 1921. Years later, Durruti helped to form Los Solidarios [Solidarity], which successfully assassinated Cardinal Juan Soldevilla y Romero in 1923. After a seizure of power by Miguel Primo de Rivera in 1923, Durruti and others organized a military response and attacked state forces in Barcelona and French border towns. When the civil war broke out, Durruti helped to coordinate military maneuvers against Franco’s forces, basing his combat around Barcelona. In July 1936, Durruti led more than 3,000 anarchist militants from Barcelona to Zaragoza in what became known as the Durruti Column. Four months later, in November 1936, Durruti led his column to Madrid to stop Franco’s assault on the city. During the fighting’s counterattack, Durruti was shot and killed, likely the result of friendly fire. Durruti is remembered as a hero, an anarchist militant, and a revolutionary armed fighter against fascism, willing to wage war to foster a worker-controlled anarchist society.

Anarchist “Leadership” in the Opposition to Modern Wars

Following World War II, anarcho-pacifism grew in prominence in the United States, United Kingdom, and Netherlands and would prove to be an influential tendency in antinuclear

campaigns and the environmental radicalism that developed alongside these movements. Anarchists have often found themselves at the forefront of antiwar organizing, such as the UK campaign No War But the Class War, which developed during the first Gulf War (1990–1991). In this campaign and subsequent ones by anarchists, criticism was levied at both sides of the conflict—the United States and Saddam Hussein—which avoided a typical leftist tendency to oppose the aggressor state (the United States) and accommodate the besieged (Hussein’s Iraq). The same group also opposed involvement in the Kosovo conflict (1998–1999), a conflict overlooked by many progressive antiwar movements. For the UK anarchists of the 1990s, the rejection of war was more comprehensive and therefore reflected the antistate tendencies of the perspective. Other movements involving antimilitarist and antiwar positions have been heavily influenced by anarchist participation, such as those calling for the closure of the School of the Americas (now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) and those in support of the Palestinian antioccupation movement.

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the drive toward wars in Afghanistan (2001–2014) and Iraq (2003–2011), anarchists continued to work at the forefront of antiwar organizing and often served key organizational roles in protests and direct actions. For example, after the 9/11 attacks, the autumn Washington, D.C., meetings of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) were canceled, and consequently, most liberal and progressive social movements canceled their planned protests. While this cancellation severely restricted the number of attendees, an unpermitted, anarchist-organized march (September 29, 2001) and direct action of the Anti-Capitalist Convergence (ACC) carried on while other groups decided to host a permitted rally. This march was in response to the ACC’s revised “Call to Action,” distributed only nine days after the 9/11 attacks. This document called for a “march against the growing capitalist war” and invited “all those interested in creating a world free from terror, hate, racism, poverty and war to demonstrate our unity and vision for a better world.” The day of the march, the front banner read, “No War But the Class War,” and through careful messaging, the group reframed their protest to oppose not only the policies of neoliberalism embodied in the IMF and WB but also nationalism, militarism, and war.

See also [Activism](#), [Social Ethic of](#); [Authoritarianism](#); [Capitalism and War](#); [Civil Disobedience](#); [Class](#); [Communism](#); [Conscientious Objectors](#); [Fascism](#); [Feminist Understandings of War](#); [Imperialism](#); [Marxist Theories of War](#); [Nation Building](#); [Nationalism](#); [Nation-State](#); [Peace Movements](#); [Power](#); [Solidarity](#)

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