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The Bolshevik Anti-Anarchist Action of Spring 1918

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In his memoirs, Bruce Lockhart, Britain’s representative to the Bolshevik regime in 1918, gave a gripping account of the Bolshevik action to suppress the Russian Anarchists, which took place on 11-12 April that year. Invited by Trotsky to inspect the scene in the capital, he left readers with the following description.

One of Trotsky’s first tasks as Commissar of War had been to rid Moscow of the anarchist bands who were terrorising the city. At three in the early morning of 12 April he carried out a simultaneous raid on the 26 anarchist nests. The venture was a complete success. After a desperate resistance the Anarchists were evicted from the houses they had occupied, and all their machine guns, their rifles, their ammunition and loot were captured. Over a hundred were killed in the fighting. Five hundred were arrested. Later in the day on [Cheka Chief Feliks] Dzeržynski’s invitation, [US diplomat Raymond] Robins and I made tour of the different fighting areas. We were given a car and an armed escort. Our cicerone was [Iakov] Peters, Dzeržynski’s Lettish assistant and my future gaoler-in-chief. The Anarchists had appropriated the finest houses in Moscow. On the Povarskaia, where the rich merchants lived, we entered house after house. The filth was indescribably. Broken bottles littered the floors, the magnificent ceilings were perforated with bullet-holes. Wine stains and human excrement blotched the Aubusson carpets. Priceless pictures had been slashed to strips. The dead still lay where they had fallen. They included officers in guards’ uniform, students – young boys of twenty – and men who belonged obviously to the criminal class and whom the revolution had released from prison. In the luxurious drawing room of the House of Gracheva the Anarchists had been surprised in the middle of an orgy. The long table which had supported the feast had been overturned, and broken plates, glasses, champagne bottles, made unsavoury islands in a pool of blood and spilt wine. On the floor lay a young woman, face downwards. Peters turned her over. Her hair was dishevelled. She had been shot through the neck, and the blood had
congealed in a sinister purple clump. She could not have been more than twenty. Peters shrugged his shoulders, ‘Prostitutka’, he said. ‘Perhaps it is for the best’.

By involving Bruce Lockhart this way in the suppression of the Anarchists, the Bolsheviks were clearly wanting the world to see that they were ending revolutionary chaos and restoring order. This, of course, was not an isolated incident, and the action against the Moscow Anarchists was, at one level, part of a broader move to discipline the hot-heads of the revolution and establish order, a campaign which affected provincial cities as well. Aaron Retish has shown how, in April 1918, Maximalist Red Guards were disciplined in Izhevsk, while Stefan Karsch has described a similar clamp down on the Workers’ Militia in Voronezh. However, was this action against the Moscow Anarchists simply the first of many moves by authoritarian Bolsheviks against the ideologues of revolutionary spontaneity – from an Anarchist perspective a long drawn-out process which would culminate in the Stalinist purge of Trotskyists - or was there more to the April action than that? Even at the time, the Bolsheviks seem to have been uncertain about their motivation. In the Soviet press comment immediately after the affair, Izvestiia insisted the Bolshevik action had been taken to put an end to robbery and murder, echoing the theme of Bruce Lockhart’s stage-managed tour of Povarskaia Street. Izvestiia ridiculed the rumours which were circulating to the effect that the Bolsheviks had acted to pre-empt a planned Anarchist insurrection. Pravda, on the other hand, was clear from the start that prompt action by the Bolsheviks had nipped a carefully planned Anarchist counter-revolutionary conspiracy in the bud. And, as this article will show, a second post October insurrection, a Third Russian Revolution, was an Anarchist imperative.

Very little is said about the events of April 1918 by Paul Avrich, whose 1967 study The Russian Anarchists remains the only overview of the Russian Anarchist movement written in English. The Russian Anarchists surveys the Anarchist movement from 1905 to 1921, introducing the reader to the key distinction between terrorists and peaceful propagandists, as well as outlining the growing influence by the eve of the First World War of Anarcho-Syndicalists; the emergence of Anarcho-Syndicalism transformed the movement from one based, in 1905, predominantly in the Jewish Pale of Settlement, to one centred, by 1917, on the industrial working class
of St. Petersburg and Moscow. As Avrich comments: “within a few weeks after the collapse of Tsarism, Anarchist groups dotted the working-class sectors of the capital and its suburbs”; their “heaviest concentration” was in the Vyborg District. Avrich chronicles their activity during the July Days and the October insurrection, stressing their important role in the factory committee movement, a topic he developed more fully in a *Slavic Review* article of 1963. However, his comments on the Anarchist movement after the capital moved to Moscow in March 1918 are sketchy in the extreme. He notes the emergence of a strong Moscow Federation of Anarchist Groups, he names some of the new key activists to emerge, like Lev Chernyi (the poet P. D. Turchianov), but on the events of April 1918 comments only that, against a background of Anarchist Black Guard “expropriations”, the Bolsheviks decided to act after an Anarchist band stole a car belonging to the American diplomat Raymond Robbins. Avrich went on to write in more detail about Makhno and the fate of the Anarchists during the Civil War, and particularly about the Kronstadt Rebellion in 1921, but he did not expand on his comments about April 1918.

This article will begin by establishing the context for the events of spring 1918, the evolution of Anarchist ideas about a tactical alliance with the Bolsheviks followed by a genuine popular insurrection, and then look in some detail at whether the crisis provoked by the Treaty of Brest Litovsk did present Anarchists with the opportunity to mount just such a challenge to the Bolsheviks.

*The Anarchists Before October*

The Anarchists never had any time for Kerensky or for the Provisional Government. Writing from Geneva in May 1917, before his return to Russia, the leading Anarchist Iuda Roshchin welcomed Russia’s new freedom in the émigré newspaper *Put’k Svobode*: “Greeting to the fighters for the happiness of the people! We now desire the expansion of the revolution for we are convinced that only in time of revolution will there awaken all the mighty and good forces that slumber in the soul of the people”. To those who counselled caution and who called on the Anarchists not to be intransigent, he added: “But is preserving what has already been won really intransigence? Is not the expansion of demands which flow from the depths of the people in fact the best means to combat the possibility of counter-revolution?”
impatience with the Provisional Government made the Anarchists potential allies for the Bolsheviks, especially once the April Theses had been issued. Indeed Kommuna, the organ of the Federation of Petrograd Anarchists, commented in response to the April events that what had happened “loudly announced to the whole world that Russia is not going to go along the road of the bourgeois order, and that the Provisional Government would not determine its future”: the future would be the work of “the Russian people” since “the revolution which has begun, once turned into a social revolution, can only end with the complete destruction of the class state order”. The Anarchists argued that the new Coalition Government established at the start of May had already shown that no real changes were taking place “in the area of the economy, of class inequality and war and peace”; it was a government propped up by “Menshevik Liquidators”. However, Kommuna went on, the “revolutionary people and the army had outstripped its leaders [during the April Days], declaring that it would not accept a compromise with the enemies of labour”. There was, the Anarchist newspaper suggested, an ever present danger of counter-revolution, but “the armed Russian people together with the soviets” would deal with the “bankers and the aristocrats”. The same issue of Kommuna carried an article which made clear the Anarchists’ opposition to the Constituent Assembly, what it called “the new bourgeois idol”. It declared that “freedom is in anarchism, in the destruction of power”. “Our tasks follow from this,” it went on, “we must unite the proletariat, together with the army and the peasantry, into one powerful army of labour, opposed to the world of capitalists, factory owners and merchants”. The Anarchists recognised only one war, that “of the hungry against social parasitism”.8

When in May “the Menshevik Liquidators” in the Coalition Government moved against the Red Guards and other workers’ militias and tried to re-establish a regular civil police force, the Anarchists gave sanctuary to the People’s Militia movement and this became their first major field of activity. On 27 May, they hosted the First Conference of Petrograd People’s Militias at the Durnovo Mansion, in the Vyborg District, which they had seized in the chaos of the February Revolution. On 3 June they hosted a Second Conference, joining the Bolsheviks on the Council of People’s Militias established on that occasion.9 Immediately after this, in an incident, which caused a great scandal at the time, on 5 June 80 armed Anarchists seized the printing press of the right-wing newspaper Russkaia volia; by 7 June, the army had forced
them to back down and leave. Trying to push home its advantage, on the same day the Provisional Government ordered the Anarchists to vacate the Durnovo Mansion. They refused to leave and appealed to the workers to support them: 28 factories, mostly in Vyborg District, passed resolutions of support and the Soviet decided to mediate, persuading the Ministry of Justice to revoke its ultimatum. On 8 June, the First Congress of Soviets, then in session, discussed the issue and called on those workers still on strike to return to work. The Bolsheviks supported the Anarchists in this stand-off, encouraging resolutions in their support and joining the committee set up to defend the Durnovo Mansion.10

When it came to the demonstration planned for 10 June to denounce the Coalition Government and demand a Soviet Government, the Anarchists were unwilling to follow the Bolshevik lead and back down; indeed, they saw a second revolution as imminent. The day before the demonstration, which the Bolsheviks called off at the last minute, the Anarchists established a Provisional Revolutionary Committee at the Durnovo Mansion, calling on Kronstadt sailors to join the events planned for the 10th. Even after the demonstration had been called off, this Provisional Revolutionary Committee continued to meet on 11, 12 and 13 June with the idea of a further demonstration on the 14th, moves that the Bolsheviks would not back. With representatives of 150 factories at one of these meetings, it was clear that the Anarchists’ radicalism had a certain popular response. When the official Soviet demonstration of 18 June took place, the Anarchists insisted on challenging the government by carrying arms; the Bolsheviks limited their opposition to carrying anti-government banners. During that demonstration, some Anarchists broke away and liberated the Bolshevik editor of Okupnaia Pravda from the Kresty prison. This prompted the government to send the army into the Durnovo Mansion at 3. a.m. on 19 June, in an operation which saw one leading anarchist die and sixty others arrested; the forced closure of the Durnovo Mansion, a public space which had been turned into a park and social facility as well as the Anarchist headquarters, prompted several days of demonstrations.11

The Anarchists continued to see Russia as being on the eve of a second revolution as the July Days crisis evolved. On 2 July, a meeting of the Anarchist leadership called for the whole Anarchist organisation to mobilise for insurrection on 3 July. On that
day Efim Iarchuk, a veteran of 1905 and an early convert to Anarcho-Syndicalism, challenged the sailors gathered on Anchor Square in Kronstadt with the words: “will you refuse to come out in defence of the Revolution!”\(^{12}\) Another Anarchist leader Iosif Bleikhman, a member of the Petrograd Soviet, told a meeting of the First Machine Gun Regiment on that day: “Overthrow the Provisional Government immediately, not in order to turn power over to the ‘bourgeois’ Soviet, but to take it into your own hands”. When challenged by Bolsheviks about the lack of preparation for such a move, Bleikhman said “the street will organise us”. At eight in the evening of 3 July he and other surviving members of the Anarchist Provisional Revolutionary Committee climbed onto trucks provided by the First Machine Gun Regiment and set off for action. The next day he was one of the first to greet the Kronstadters: showing none of the Bolsheviks’ hesitancy, he called on them to overthrow the government.

As late as 5 July, the Anarchists were arguing that all was not lost and that the events of 4 July had shown the strength of organised workers, who should come out onto the streets once again.\(^{13}\)

Like the Bolsheviks, the Anarchists recovered from the setback of the July Days by working among the rank and file in the factories. From August onwards, the Anarcho-Syndicalists grouped around the weekly newspaper *Golos truda* began to make their presence felt. For them, the growth of the factory committees, as opposed to the trade unions – condemned by the Anarchists as a purely party enterprise – was “a product of the creativity of the working masses” and it was clear that “in future they may even play the decisive role in the engagement between labour and capital”.\(^{14}\) A smattering of factory committee resolutions passed in the autumn used the tell-tale anarchist phrase about workers taking the factories “into their own hands”. Certainly supporters of *Golos truda* worked together with the Bolsheviks in the Central Council of Factory Committees.\(^{15}\) Grigorii Maksimov (Maximoff), the leading Anarcho-Syndicalist, was elected to the Central Council of the Petrograd Factory Committees in June.\(^{16}\)

Working alongside the Bolsheviks was not easy because of continuing Anarchist impatience with Bolshevik caution and the very different Anarchist vision of the imminent second revolution. On 17 September the Anarchists called on workers to unite in their craft unions and declare their factories the property of the people, the people who alone could maintain production. Such a transfer of industrial enterprises to the management of craft unions would be a huge step on the road to what they
called “our revolution, to the great freedom of freewill [k bol’shoi vol’noi vole]”.

During the First National Conference of Factory Committees, 17-22 October, the Anarchists received 5 votes to the 65 of the Bolsheviks. Despite this relatively poor showing, their presence was strong enough for the Bolshevik Vladimir Miliutin to find “it necessary to refute the Anarchist notion of workers taking over their own factories”.

Anarchists were both working with the Bolsheviks and against them. As one of the Anarchist leaders Vsevolod Eikhenbuam remembered things, “the Anarchists . . . did everything they could to support and encourage the action of the masses against Kerensky”, so they played an active role in the October seizure of power. Iarchuk, was a member of the Military Revolutionary Committee during October and other anarchists helped storm the Winter Palace. Although Eikhenbaum later claimed that in October “the working class . . . left everything to the Bolsheviks, who seized control of the action”, that was not entirely true.

During the Second Congress of Soviets and immediately afterwards, the Anarchists co-operated with the Left SRs in bringing pressure to bear on the Bolsheviks to form a coalition government. Ultimately, of course, the Anarchists did not want a party government of any sort, be it single party or coalition. On the eve of October, Golos truda asked rhetorically what was meant by the slogan “All Power to the Soviets!”.

The paper answered that for this slogan “to signify the victory of labour”, then it was essential that “the political party aspiring to power . . . liquidates itself after victory and yields its place effectively to a free self-government of workers”.

The Anarchists after October

This dilemma the Anarchists would have with Bolshevik power was discussed in the Anarchist press even before the October Revolution. When, at the start of September, the possibility of forming a Soviet Government was first discussed as a response to the Kornilov crisis, the Anarchists were clear: “the transfer of authority to the hands of the Central Executive Committee is not the answer to the crisis of power”. In a key editorial of 17 September in the first issue of Svobodnaia kommuna, the organ of the Petrograd and Kronstadt Anarchist Communists, the newspaper tried to assess the balance of political forces in Russia as of autumn 1917. It made clear that the
Anarchists had not been surprised by General Kornilov’s attempted coup: ever since there had been talk within the Coalition Government of “iron discipline” and “a single power”, the road had been left open to dictatorship; in July the Soviet should never have allowed Kerensky the power to form a government based on personal allegiance. Where then, did that put Russia as the moves to summon a Second Congress of Soviets got underway? “At the time in question, Kerensky personified the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie,” Svobodnaia kommuna declared, “[General] Kaledin represented the landowners and the Bolsheviks represented the workers.” Which represented the least evil of these three? The Anarchists verdict was clear: “Faced with the dictatorship of landowners or the bourgeoisie, we temporarily support the dictatorship of the proletariat!” Anarchists would support the Bolsheviks, but for how long? Their support could only ever be temporary and hedged around with caveats. Thus on the eve of October Golos truda made clear that “only if ‘power to the soviets’ does not in fact become the statist power of a new political party” could the current crisis become “the start of a new era”. If a new party did seize political authority, then “after a more or less prolonged interruption, the struggle will inevitably be renewed; there will begin a third and last stage of the Russian Revolution”. 23

In the weeks after October, the main Anarchist concern continued to be workers’ control and they made every effort to make the Decree on Workers’ Control as decentralised a document as possible, keeping workers’ control at the factory level. At the Fifth Petrograd Conference of Factory Committees on 16 November, the 13 Anarchist delegates - there were 96 Bolshevik delegates and 24 SRs – were vociferous in their demands: one insisted that “we must take over both works and factories . . control is possible only when everything is ours”, while a second argued that the Bolshevik “Decree on Workers’ Control is slowing down the movement”. 24 The Anarchist press took the same line. On 3 November Golos truda declared: “it is not state power which needs to be seized, but production, because with the seizure of production we destroy both capitalism and the state at one blow and we will replace both of them with a genuinely socialist society, resting on real freedom, equality and brotherhood”. 25

For the Anarchists, the Bolsheviks were not being revolutionary enough. The Bolsheviks still fought shy of ending the private ownership of capital. On 21
November 1917, *Golos anarkhistov* issued an editorial which linked their criticism of the Bolshevik concept of workers’ control of industry to that of ownership. The Bolsheviks wanted workers’ control, but without taking firms into public ownership. “The idea of worker and peasant power alongside workers’ control of production – such utopian thoughts are condemned in advance to failure. In the view of Anarchists, the peaceful collaboration of labour and capital, even within a democratic system of power headed by workers, is stupid.” The article “The Bolsheviks in Power”, published in the same paper, made clear that “the course taken [by the Bolsheviks] towards social revolution is completely incorrect”. A workers’ state could not exist alongside capitalism: the banks and the old ministers continued to resist, and so the Council of People’s Commissars was powerless to act. The Soviet Government’s enforcer, the Left SR strongman Lieutenant Colonel Mikhail Muraviev could frighten small speculators, but not big business. “The Bolsheviks do not have the daring and muscle to touch the bases of capitalist life, the Bolsheviks hesitate between faith in the revolution and doubts about their strength.”

It was because of his success in developing ideas of this kind that, at the end of 1917, Eikhenbaum was approached by workers from the Nobel oil refinery and asked to help prevent its closure. Eikhenbaum was invited to speak, he recalled, because the workers felt that “their government” had refused to act. He therefore attended a general meeting of the workforce and there clashed with Aleksandr Shliapnikov, the Bolshevik Commissar of Labour, and other Bolshevik officials who explained that there was no alternative to closing the refinery. Eikhenbaum gave the Anarchist message: “you have only one recourse, and that is to manage for yourselves and fight your way out by your own strength”. He suggested they send out gangs to seize the fuel and rail trucks they needed, and to appoint scouts to actively seek for orders. Methods such as these had had some success earlier in the year, but since the shut down in the defence industries prompted by the armistice signed on the Eastern Front in December, they were scarcely likely to be successful. Shliapnikov denounced Eikhenbaum and the Anarchists as “petty bourgeois wreckers *par excellence*”, who were mixing themselves up in affairs of which they had no real understanding.26

The Anarchists did not see themselves as wreckers. In their view, only genuine commitment to workers’ self-government could save the revolution. On 4 December
1917 the short lived journal *Trud i volia* stated, after summarising the basic credo of Anarchist ideas, that what was needed was “the Free City of Petrograd”. The article discussed the future for the Bolshevik Party, and concluded that “if the party of Bolsheviks does not want to cede the state power that has fallen into its hands, if it does not want the present government of its party members to be replaced by a coalition of right ‘socialists’ and the bourgeoisie, it must make every effort for Petrograd to become a Commune”. The paper then gave a summary history of the Paris Commune stressing its self-governing essence. A few days later, *Golos truda* commented that the Bolsheviks, once a revolutionary force, had become “a force for stagnation” [застой]: the nature of the soviets had changed, “the soviets today are organs of [central] power in the localities… organs of state, legislation, organs of representation”. The change in the nature of the soviets, the move from debate towards administration, the failure to establish a Petrograd Commune were for the Anarchists clear signs that the Bolshevik Revolution was ossifying as early as December 1917.

For how much longer would the anarchists support the Bolshevik “dictatorship of the proletariat”? An article in *Golos truda* for mid January 1918 suggested that the patience of the Anarchists was running out: “From worker-peasant soviets to local free communes [обшчины]; from the congress of soviets to the federation of communes [коммуны]; from the Soviet Republic to a communist structure [строи] – that is the mapped-out road, the only road which will lead the present social revolution to the full victory of the people over the forces holding it back”. When in the last week of January the Soviet Government took a series of measures to control the press, *Golos truda* was very clear about the authoritarian dangers this posed. The Anarchists had long argued that their freedom to publish had been frustrated by such cynical Bolshevik moves as cutting power to the printing house at 3 a.m. in the morning, just as the presses began to role. Now legal restrictions were to be introduced and on 13 February *Golos truda* declared that authoritarianism could never lead to socialism: the new decree did not suppress the bourgeois press, as was claimed, “but all vestiges of freedom of the press in general”. The paper also made clear that Bolshevik harassment would fail, because Anarchism was indestructible: “Anarchism is not only an idea, a goal; it is, before anything else, also a method, a means of struggling for the emancipation of man”.

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It was, however, the Treaty of Brest Litovsk which finally sparked the crisis which broke the Anarchists’ patience with the Bolshevik “dictatorship of the proletariat”. It is impossible to exaggerate the scale of the crisis for revolutionary Russia unleashed by the Treaty of Brest Litovsk - it literally threw a bomb under the certainties of all revolutionaries. That the treaty lasted for only six months and ended with a new upsurge of revolutionary change throughout Europe was scarcely possible to predict at the time. And even when that new revolutionary upswing developed, the Bolshevik Party and its revolutionary cause had, according to its revolutionary critics, been fatally harmed by the bureaucratisation and militarisation of its rule. The concept of revolutionary war, rejected by Trotsky as he defended the Treaty of Brest Litovsk in February 1918, had been defended by him just two months earlier when he addressed the Soviet Executive on 8 December 1917 explaining how, in order to defend “our revolutionary honour”, Bolshevik Russia would “fight to the last drop of blood”. The issue of peace and war divided both parties which made up the ruling Bolshevik-Left SR coalition; Lenin got his way and the treaty was signed because the Bolsheviks showed a little more party discipline than their Left SR comrades. On the night of 18-19 February, the Bolshevik Central Committee, the Left SR Central Committee and then the Coalition Government itself voted to seek terms with the Germans, but decided not to put this to a session of the Soviet Executive. Such caution was understandable, since on 19 February the Left SR Central Committee revoked its earlier decision and the Bolshevik Petrograd City Party Conference rejected the approach to Germany.

When the German terms were received, Lenin had to threaten to resign to get endorsement from the Bolshevik Central Committee. When the Soviet Executive finally met on 23-24 February, the Left SRs were firmly opposed to acceptance, while the Bolsheviks, meeting in a party caucus, debated the issue once again. Lenin won a majority, and most Bolsheviks opposed to the peace followed the dictates of party discipline, while on the Left SR side those in favour of peace decided to abstain. Getting this decision endorsed by the Bolshevik Party stretched the gerrymandering skills of the party apparatus to the maximum. At the Seventh Congress of the Bolshevik Party on 6-7 March 1918, the pro-war Left Communists found themselves in a minority of the hurriedly assembled 70 delegates, only 46 of whom had voting
rights. Yet delegates’ reports revealed strong pockets of the Party opposed to peace. On the Volga and in the Urals support for a revolutionary war was strong, and this was also the case for delegates representing Ukraine and the Don, areas rapidly falling under German occupation. A survey of local soviets carried out in early March revealed a clear majority in favour of revolutionary war, although both the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets had voted for peace on 5 March. Perhaps most concerning of all to Lenin, the Left Communists continued to control the Moscow Regional Party Committee until mid-May. Party organisations in the Urals were also preaching revolutionary war as late as May, while when a separate Ukrainian Communist Party was established on 19 April, it too adopted a pro-war stance.\textsuperscript{34} The records of the Bolshevik Party Central Committee make clear that, while its forays into day-to-day government at this time were limited, the issue of peace both dominated its meetings in January and February, and continued to do so in March and the start of April.\textsuperscript{35}

Bolshevik concerns were not just the continuing volatility of the Left Communists, but their relationship with the Left SRs.\textsuperscript{36} This was by no means straightforward, since the trauma of Brest Litovsk continued to divide the Left SRs as well. When the Fourth Congress of Soviet met on 15 March and endorsed the signature of the Treaty of Brest Litovsk twelve days earlier, Lenin spoke for its ratification and the Left SR leader Boris Kamkov spoke against. Lenin could take comfort from the fact that the Left Communists had decided to abstain rather than oppose him, so it was now the divisions among the Left SRs which were on view. Kamkov argued that the treaty would not provide a breathing space for the revolution but would actually suffocate it. On this the Left SRs agreed, but should their response be to leave the government in protest or stay within it to mitigate the threatening disaster? It was divisions on this that led the Left SRs to take the confusing step of both leaving the Soviet Government but remaining in the Soviet administration, including the Supreme Military Council and the Cheka. At the Second Congress of the Left SRs on 17-25 April, disagreements surrounding this compromise were loudly aired once again, with Mariia Spiridonova leading those opposed to the break with the Bolsheviks.\textsuperscript{37} The Treaty of Brest Litovsk risked blowing the Soviet body politic apart, and it was against the background of this tempestuous crisis that the action against the Anarchists played out.
Eikhenbaum was clear what the Treaty of Brest Litovsk meant from an Anarchist perspective. He commented in his memoirs: “[The Treaty of Brest Litovsk signified] for the first time that ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’ had won over the proletariat. For the first time Bolshevik Power succeeded in terrorising the masses, in substituting its will for theirs, in acting on its own”. Burevestnik argued on 9 March 1918 that the Treaty of Brest Litovsk reflected the Bolsheviks’ lack of faith in the working class. The Bolsheviks had come up with a statist solution to a problem which could only be solved by the action of the masses themselves. Burevestnik claimed: “those gentlemen are greatly mistaken, thinking that their present revolution has already ended, that now all that remains is to firm up its miserable achievements. No! The present revolution, the social revolution, the liberator of labourers from all countries is only just beginning”. For the Anarchists, the Brest Litovsk crisis heralded a new upsurge in revolutionary fervour, and the refusal of the Bolsheviks to take this on board and stand at its head was why they were now addressed as “gentlemen” rather than ‘comrades’. As Avrich noted: “the stream of obloquy from the Anarchist press reached an unprecedented level in February 1918, when the Bolsheviks renewed their peace negotiations with the Germans at Brest Litovsk”.

Golos truda informed its readers at this time: “From the beginning, we have been against the ‘peace negotiations’; today we are opposed to signing the treaty.” Instead of peace, there should be war, but an Anarchist war. The paper went on: “we are for immediate and intensive organisation of partisan resistance. We consider that the government’s telegram asking for peace should be revoked: the challenge should be accepted and the fate of the revolution be put directly, frankly, in the hands of the proletariat of the whole world.” The Anarchists also denounced as a false statist solution the Soviet Government’s decision to construct a standing army in the aftermath of the peace settlement. On 17 February, Golos truda made clear that the Anarchists were opposed to such an army on principle. The paper insisted that the army now being formed on the principle of military service should be disbanded and replaced by one organised according to the principles of partisan detachments; in such a partisan army, the paper explained, workers could move seamlessly from their work benches to the trenches and back again. The implication of the Golos truda message was clear: the Anarchists should prepare for an Anarchist war.
The logic of the Anarchist position was that the time to break their informal coalition with the statist Bolsheviks had come, but quite how that would be brought about was not so clear. The immediate consequence of the Treaty of Brest Litovsk Treaty was that the capital of Soviet Russia moved to Moscow and the new capital quickly became the focus of Anarchist agitation. Indeed, part of the new revolutionary upswing which the Anarchists claimed was becoming more visible as the statist revolution of the Bolsheviks began to ossify was the support they had won for a programme of seizing and occupying the mansions of the rich, ostensibly to address the housing shortage. The Moscow Anarchist Federation had been founded at the end of January 1918 and had seized for its headquarters the former club of the Kupechskoe Sobranie [Merchants’ Club], on Malaia Dmitrovka Street. Maksimov recalled in his memoirs that the building had its own library and theatre, and soon became a focal point for lectures, mass meetings and popular entertainment. The Anarchists then began to encourage supporters to take possession of other mansions in the city, and by early March an organised campaign was well underway. On 6 March 1918, the newspaper of the Moscow Anarchist Federation Anarkhiia discussed progress and reported that a commission had been established to regulate the process. “The seizures of mansions are becoming spontaneous,” it argued, adding with reference to the earlier Anarchist occupation of the Durnovo Mansion in summer 1917, that “when ten months ago Petrograd first showed this way forward, it was only seizures by revolutionary organisations, the people kept silent; nine months later it is Moscow’s turn.”

Although Anarkhiia was pleased to declare that “the movement has begun to take on a spontaneous character”, it did recognise that in these seizures “there were defects, a lack of organisation, but time does not wait and the homeless are looking for roofs over their heads, and that is the justification”. Did the movement pose a threat to the cultural artefacts held in many of these mansions, the paper asked? The initial answer seemed to be: “yes, but so what!” The paper insisted: “For us the value of a human individual is higher than the creation of an individual.” This rather philistine stance was modified by the Anarchist Federation Council a few days later when it was agreed that the mansions would be transferred to the poorest population of Moscow,
as planned, but that a housing commission would also be established which, as well as listing all vacant mansions and dividing them among the most needy, would transfer any art works or valuables found to a special museum. This work would be done “in contact” with the Moscow Soviet’s Revision Commission, on which the Anarchists had a representative who seems to have smoothed along the process.45

By early April, some 26 mansions were in Anarchist hands. The mansion of the Vilenkin family was among those taken, and Aleksandr Vilenkin, a pro-war SR who had played a prominent role in suppressing the July Days demonstrations of 1917, later recalled being allowed to stay on in the mansion living in his old room, while downstairs there was a machine gun nest in the stairwell and a banner declaring “Anarchy is the Mother of Order”.46 This was not a unique case. The first home of the Liesma group of Latvian Anarchists based in Moscow was shared with the owner of the mansion, who agreed to pay the Anarchists rent in order to continue living in half of his former house. That house, also on Malaia Dmitrovka, proved to be too small for the Latvian Anarchists after they had been joined by a group of compatriots formerly based in Kharkov: in mid March, it was feared that Kharkov was about to be occupied by the Germans and so the Kharkov-based Latvian Anarchists had moved to the capital. Thus, early in April Liesma moved to a new mansion on Vvedenskii pereulok and was joined by members of the Kommuna group of Russian Anarchists. Jānis Birze, the Liesma leader, later recalled how his group had dealt with the issue of cultural artefacts. The mansion was full of “precious porcelain, old silver, famous masters’ paintings, extensive libraries and an enormous collection of various ancient icons”. It was therefore decided “that all these historical treasures should be accessible to the broadest masses of people”, and to do this contact was made with the Moscow City Arts Committee and work began in early April on establishing a museum.47 Similarly, Maksimov recalled that the art treasures of all the mansions seized by the Anarchists were registered and preserved, ready to be transferred to museums, including those unique paintings collected by the textile magnate Savva Morozov.48 However, Iakov Peters, the deputy commander of the Cheka, recalled that the Anarchists won over the support of the population by distributing quantities of gold and silver in the name of an Anarchist division of property.49
The mansion campaign meant that the Moscow Anarchists were already engaged in what they saw as a popular action at the moment when the Soviet Government transferred its base to the city; Lenin made the journey on 10 March and Trotsky on the 16th. The local Moscow Anarchists, buoyed up by a rising popular mood which would help them challenge the Bolsheviks, had condemned the Treaty of Brest Litovsk in no uncertain terms in an editorial in Anarkhiia published on 3 March. It cried: “To Arms!” “The dreadful hour has come. The German hordes have poured into Russia, wanting to establish their thieving order among us”. The revolution could be drowned in blood, it warned, before declaring: “Comrades, we did not carry out a rebellion [bunt], we created a revolution, a revolution that is invincible and indefatigable.” Therefore what was necessary, the paper said, was this: “form anarchist fighting brigades, stand under the militant black banner”. The Russian bourgeoisie had been defeated, now it was the turn of the European bourgeoisie: “Unfurl the black banner, death to our enemies!” Anarchist fighting brigades would turn the Russian Revolution into a European Revolution with or without the Bolsheviks. The Anarchist Federal Council assembled to discuss the Treaty of Brest Litovsk, at a meeting reported in the press on 7 March, and the main decision taken then was that it was time to form a Black Guard.

This Black Guard would have the traditional anarchist federal structure of earlier armed militias, based around factory groups, but above these there would be a much more formal and centralised hierarchy. The Black Guard would have regional groups, co-ordinated by a central staff; this central staff would run a training department, a technical department and an intelligence department. Those joining the Black Guard would have to sign an agreement according to which they understood the Anarchist principles for which they were fighting. The Black Guard, therefore, would be something rather different from the existing anarchist militias which had carried through the occupation of the mansions and helped “expropriate the bourgeoisie”. Its future actions were to be much more tightly focused than a generalised attack on the rich. The Anarchist Federation recognised that some of the earlier militia actions had been little short of banditry - an accusation which was repeatedly made against the anarchist militias by their opponents. The Anarchist Federal Council now stated that with the formation of the Black Guard, things would be different: “Crude forms of struggle against the counter-revolution are not wanted, what is wanted is for searches
and arrests to be aimed in the main at disarming the opponent. All searches are to be carried out with the agreement of a special commission made up of at least three, and these decisions should be conveyed to soviet power.  

A few days later, on 10 March, Anarkhiia reported some clarifications about the structure and activities of the Black Guard, which all stressed the initiative as being something new. The aim of the Black Guard continued to be to combat White Guards and “the bourgeoisie who have gone underground”, but unlike previous Anarchist militias, the paper stressed, Black Guard units were seen as permanent bodies, even if continuing to be organised on partisan principles. What is more, as a permanent institution the Black Guard would share information with Red Guards and with the Red Army. Headed by a Temporary Organising Commission, the Quartermaster Commission would consider issues such as barracks, food supply and uniforms; the Weapons Commission would distribute arms; the Information Commission would undertake contacts with the Bolsheviks and other formations; and the Instruction Commission would plan training. Centralisation was extended: on 16 March Anarkhiia made clear that any Black Guard action had to be counter-signed by three members of the Black Guard Staff. Anarkhiia gave even more information about how the Black Guard would operate four days later. The paper made clear that to join the Black Guard it was essential to have a recommendation. These could be obtained from 1) a local anarchist group, 2) three individual members of the anarchist federation, 3) a factory committee, or 4) the district soviet. All recruits were to report to the Anarkhiia offices on Malaia Dmitrovka. Although the organisational principles of the Black Guard repeatedly referred to the need for co-ordination with the Red Army, these initiatives were totally at variance with the military initiatives of the Bolsheviks taken at this time. On 19 March, Trotsky told the Moscow Soviet that he intended to form a traditional disciplined professional army, drawing on military specialists from the ancient régime. The Anarchists, however, were not listening. On 23 March, Anarkhiia criticised Trotsky’s vision of the Red Army as “a salaried army” which was “egotistical and corrupt”. On 28 March, Trotsky repeated his call for a professional army when addressing the Moscow City Communist Party, and he made clear on this occasion that the practice of electing officers was to be abolished in the Red Army by decree. The organisational principles of the Black Guard did not even raise the issue of officers.
As the Soviet Government began to establish itself in Moscow, it faced an Anarchist movement that had not only decided that its policy of collaborating with the Bolshevik “dictatorship of the proletariat” was over, but which was busy with two active revolutionary campaigns which challenged Bolshevik authority. Through the occupation of the mansions, the masses were called upon to end the economic power of the bourgeoisie, while through the actions of the Black Guard, the Russian Revolution was supposed to spread throughout Europe by igniting an international revolutionary war. Determined moves to reassert the authority of the Soviet Government began with the mansion campaign. On 3 April, the Soviet Executive issued an Instruction to the population of Moscow which made clear that life and property had to be respected and that the Cheka would investigate all thefts and crimes. It went on: “all those carrying weapons should immediately approach the organs of Soviet power to obtain the appropriate permissions”. The instruction concluded by making clear that “all explosive material owned by private individuals, organisations and parties held without permission” should be handed in at once. Searches could only be undertaken in the presence of a local district commissar, the Instruction made clear, and equally, if a building were requisitioned, compensation should be paid according to the established norms laid out in the housing decrees. The following day Pravda reported that when the so-called “Independent Anarchists” had seized a mansion at 1 Meshchanskaia Street and taken charge of a quantity of silver, government troops had been called on to respond and order had been restored. According to the paper, in other moves to restore order, the authorities had also detained a bank official for appropriating 20,000 roubles, as well as seizing 3,000 puds of sugar which they believed were destined for the black market. On 6 April, Pravda made clear that all trade was to be controlled through the Commissariat of Supply and “all institutions operating outside that commissariat would be wound up”. Meanwhile, the commissar of the Butyrka Prison had been dismissed after accusations that he had accepted bribes in return for releasing prisoners early.56

By the beginning of April, the Anarchists were themselves beginning to have concerns about the activities of some of those acting in their name. As early as 12 March, Anarkhiia had reported that “there had been some misuse of the fame of the federation” when “certain unknown people had lifted purses, made threats for the
purpose of extortion, and carried out searches and arrests”.

On 3 April 1918, *Anarkhiia* carried an “Announcement from the Union of Independent Anarchists”. This stated that the union “wanted it brought to every reader’s attention that the people who have been carrying out individual expropriations have nothing in common with the union and were only using the name of the union to carry out robberies. The union considered them provocateurs whom they would oppose in the most decisive way.”

An editorial in *Svobodnaia kommuna* on 5 April “categorically condemned private expropriations”; those carrying them out were not Anarchists, as they claimed, but enemies of the working class. Some Anarchists at least were trying to get their own house in order and counter the belief of Peters and others that “the vast majority [of Anarchists] were people who wanted to live without any sort of job but on the profit of robberies”.

It is also clear that, for some Bolsheviks and some Anarchists, co-operation between the Bolsheviks and Anarchists was still feasible. *Pravda* announced on 4 April that local Bolsheviks were organising a talk on “Anarchists and Bolsheviks” at the Vvedenskii People’s House. A week later, the Bolshevik daily conceded that the Anarchists were right to criticise the current pay inequalities, accepting that it was essential for the Bolshevik Government to set maximum and minimum wage rates.

At the same time, the Anarchists seemed to want to tighten control over the more freelance operations undertaken in their name. *Anarkhiia* reported on 4 April that the Secretariat of the Black Guard had asked for the names of all members and groups who were linked to the Moscow Anarchist Federation, so that a proper register could be held. At the same time the Anarchist Federal Council met to clarify the tasks of the Black Guard. This meeting made clear: “the Black Guard must not take on itself the tasks of the Red Guard, that is searches and arrests, etc. When it comes to requisitioning homes for the unemployed, that is the task of a special housing commission, composed of representatives of all groups”. These decisions suggest that the self-disciplining of rogue units by the Anarchist leadership was having some success.

A Bolshevik-Anarchist *modus vivendi* seemed possible when it came to the mansion campaign, and there were even some Bolsheviks who were prepared to work with the Anarchists when it came to the Black Guard. Peters is clear that, before the April
action, Moscow manifested “a peaceful tendency” towards the Anarchists and the Moscow Commissariat for Military Affairs (as opposed to the national All-Russian Commissariat for Military Affairs) even issued them with weapons, ranging from rifles to grenades and machine guns. And indeed, on 22 March the Moscow Commissariat of Military Affairs did agree that Anarchist units could be armed. However, there were other clear signs of growing alarm amongst those Bolsheviks who distrusted the Anarchists and wanted to confront the Black Guard danger. Jānis Pieče was the Bolshevik commander of Moscow’s Red Guard and he was at loggerheads with Nikolai Muralov, who headed Moscow’s military command which had been so ready to arm the Anarchists. The disagreement between them was also partly about military structures: Pieče, despite his opposition to the Anarchists, wanted a partisan army while Muralov backed Trotsky’s call for a professional army. However, the crux of the matter was Pieče’s hostility to working with any other political party, and this included the Left SRs working in the Commissariat of Military Affairs. For Pieče all Left SRs were potential traitors.

This meant that Pieče was particularly hostile to the Left SRs’ leading military commander, Muraviev. The two men had first clashed in December 1917 when Muraviev had mobilised some of Pieče’s Red Guard units to reinforce his military campaign to capture Kiev. Muraviev had then remained in Ukraine, fighting first around Odessa and then resisting the German advance, temporarily blocking their forward march for a while at the Battle of Bakhmach on 15 March 1918. Pieče claimed in his memoirs that it was he who had taken the initiative in getting Muraviev recalled from Ukraine and in having him placed under arrest some weeks later. He had done this because he saw Muraviev as responsible for getting two arrested Left SRs released. Muraviev arrived in Moscow on 22 March to a hero’s welcome, as the military commander prepared to fight the Germans. As his and other armoured trains arrived at the Kursk Station transporting the battle-weary troops evacuated from Ukraine, there were demonstrations staged by both Left SRs and Anarchists; these threatened to get out of hand since the soldiers were “armed to the teeth”. Pieče therefore resolved to surround the armoured grains with “naval artillery” and enforced the disarming of the demonstrators. Pieče noted in his memoirs that he acted with the support of Sverdlov, but against the wishes of Muralov who had, he maintained, always been opposed to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. In fact Dzeržynski had wanted
to have Muraviev arrested there and then, but could not get Trotsky’s permission. 68
Muraviev was only arrested on 28 April, which led to protests from the prominent Anarchist Marusia Nikiforova, one of those who had accompanied him in his Odessa campaign. 69

The growing hostility of most Bolsheviks towards the Anarchists can only have been reinforced when, after Muraviev’s return, the Black Guard decided to reassess its tactics. Meeting on 4 April, the Secretariat of the Black Guard turned to the question of where best to concentrate its efforts and took the clear decision that the Black Guard should be withdrawn from hunting down “the hidden bourgeoisie” – in other words expropriations, searches and occupations, with the concomitant concern that this might degenerate into simple robbery - and was instructed instead to take on a new, more crucial task: the Black Guard partisans were being ordered to move to the front. Just as Trotsky was trying to form a professional army and thereby put an end to free-wheeling incursions across the demarcation line with German occupied Ukraine, the Black Guard was threatening to disrupt that front by preparing for renewed military action.

Uprising?

Anarkhiia reported on 6 April that the Anarchist Federal Council had decided to hold a general meeting of the whole Moscow Anarchist Federation on 14 April. Was some sort of anti-Bolshevik insurrection to be agreed at this meeting? The leading Anarchist Aleksandr Ge, a member of the Soviet Executive, wrote an article entitled “Let’s Set Out Positions” for the 7 April edition of Svobodnaia kommuna. He made clear in this article that “the current condition is one of a great change, albeit covered up by revolutionary phraseology, carried out by the Bolsheviks who took state power into their hands.” Because the Bolsheviks opposed Kerensky’s coalition, talked of a revolutionary peace and the end of capitalism, the Anarchists supported them. But, “being opportunists by mode of thought and upbringing, the Bolsheviks have turned sharply to the right and subjected the interest of the people to the “higher” interests of “soviet power”. As Anarchists, “we always said that every state power of necessity is oppressive”, but more important than this is “the fact that the party of Bolsheviks has not fulfilled even one of its pre-October slogans: it has not destroyed the capitalist
order, it has not concluded a people’s peace, and has given neither bread nor freedom [volia].” The aim of the Anarchists is to end exploitation, and “we’ll do it without the Bolsheviks but with the people”. The article ended with the call to “form communes, organise yourselves”. Was this an indirect call to insurrection?

Certainly rumours of such an insurrection were rife, and the Cheka had picked up rumours of an Anarchist uprising planned for 18 April.70 The Anarchist press was at pains to dismiss such rumours. Thus Anarkhiia for 11 April 1918 published the following announcement: “Recently someone in [the] Zamoskvorech’e [District of Moscow] has been determinedly spreading rumours that, in the very near future, they should expect an anarchist action [vystuplenie] against the Bolsheviks. The Don [Street] Group [of Anarchists] hereby makes clear that not only is it not planning to come out against the Bolsheviks, but declares that if someone on the right – a White Guardist for example – came out against the Bolsheviks, the Don [Street] Group would defend the Bolsheviks with arms in their hands, in spite of the principled differences it has with them.”71 Despite such a reassurance, the Bolsheviks began their action to disarm the Anarchists on the night of 11-12 April, thus preventing the planned meeting of the Anarchist Federation Council, which might, or might not have taken a decision about an uprising.

In his memoirs, Peters justified the action by claiming that “White Guard officers in the mansions were pretending to be Anarchists”. But he made no mention of preparations for an uprising and expressed surprise at how little resistance the Anarchists put up – an exchange of light arms fire was all that was needed.72 One of the 400 Latvian Riflemen deployed to suppress the Anarchists had the same impression. His detachment surrounded an Anarchist mansion, threw a grenade at the locked gates and it was all over.73 If an insurrection were imminent, surely the Anarchists would not have been taken so completely by surprise – the Latvian Anarchist Group Liesma was disturbed by the attack while holding a meeting to establish a Latvian workers’ theatre.74 Press accounts of the action stressed that most of the fighting had been over by 9-10 on the morning of the 12th. The most bitter resistance came from Don Street which only surrendered at 2 p.m, by which time the second storey of the mansion occupied by the Don Street Group had been entirely destroyed. The other mansion which held out for a long time was the Anarchist
headquarters, *Dom Anarkhiia* on Malaia Dmitrovka; it only fell when the 4th Regiment of Latvian Riflemen join the *Cheka* in its assault. *Izvestiia* reported that some 500 anarchists had been detained, but only 30 had been killed or injured in the fighting; the *Cheka* conceded 10-12 casualties on its side. Despite this bitter, if short-lived, fighting, *Izvestiia* played down the seriousness of any Anarchist threat and was dismissive about the reports of insurrection: “of course, conversations about an upcoming so-called action by the Anarchists with the aim of overthrowing Soviet power were not worthy of serious consideration; that was not the issue.” The Anarchists were engaged in robbery and murder and these had to stop, the paper said.

Several incidents reported in the press on 9 April did suggest that the Anarchists’ self-disciplining of their movement had its limitations and perhaps had gone as far as it could go. Thus the Autonomy Group of Anarchists, a constituent member of the Anarchist Federation Council, seized the former house of the Kuznetsov family on Meshchanskaia Street on 9 April, thereby taking control of property which the *Cheka* later valued at 30,000 roubles. Perhaps more alarmingly, that same day a member of the American Red Cross was forced from his car by men claiming to be members of the Anarchist Federation. Another Anarchist was detained that day in possession of a vast quantity of bed linen, taken from the former building of the All-Russian Land Union: the *Cheka* accused him of black-marketeering, but the Anarchist Federation insisted he was operating with their consent and should be released. Earlier, on 6 April, *Svobodnaia kommuna* had protested at the arrest of an Anarchist member of the Soviet Executive on disputed charges of expropriation. This was essentially the line later repeated by Peters, who argued that the Anarchists had constantly challenged the authority of the Moscow Soviet to exercise its powers over law and order, leading to a “dual power” situation which had to be brought to an end.

So, *Izvestiia*’s initial response was rather similar to the scene that Peters presented to Bruce Lockhart: the Anarchists had become amoral bandits. *Pravda*, however, took a very different line. It was convinced from the start that the threat of an Anarchist insurrection was a serious one. When *Pravda* appeared on 13 April, it was less interested in the issue of law and order and far more interested in the notion of a counter-revolutionary conspiracy. It was clear, the paper said, that there was firm
evidence that counter-revolutionaries had penetrated the armed Anarchist bands and that any counter-revolution could rely on the “armed Anarchist nests”. “In spite of the assurances of the ideological side of the Anarchists that no action against the soviets would be permitted, the threat of such action was evident and in recent days was made increasingly frequently by separate Anarchists groups” For this reason the decision had been taken to act. A mass of arms was recovered: mortar shells, hand grenades, rifles, mortars revolvers and ammunition, along with gold and silver. Izvestia then fell into line, following Pravda’s lead. It too stressed that, “despite the reassurances of ideological elements within the Anarchists that no action against Soviet power would be allowed, the threat of such an action was evident and in recent time was being put forward by separate Anarchist groups”. The mansions that had been seized offered “armed bases for a potential counter-revolution”. Interviewed by Izvestia on 15 April, Dzerżyński explained that the mansions which had been seized by the Anarchists were chosen so that they were opposite the major Soviet institutions of the city, strategically placed and therefore “giving us the basis to deduce that the supposed Anarchist organisations were being led by an experienced counter-revolutionary hand”. The interrogation of Anarchists later confirmed, to the satisfaction of the Cheka, that the choice of mansions “was not accidental”. Indeed “instructions” had been found calling for mansions to be taken in certain regions and by certain road junctions.

Talk of “an experienced counter-revolutionary hand” in the selection of mansions reflects the love of conspiracy theories so prevalent among secret policemen, but was there an element of truth in the charge of counter-revolution? The Anarchists were preparing to act against the interests of the Bolshevik Government, which for Bolsheviks was counter-revolution. More than that, on approximately 25 March the Anarchists received an offer which could potentially have transformed their Black Guard into a serious fighting force. When Muraviev returned to Moscow he seems to have lost patience with the ambivalence of the Left SRs on military matters, leaving the Soviet Government tainted by the Treaty of Brest Litovsk, but supporting the Commissariat of Military Affairs committed to implementing that treaty. This led him to identify with the Anarchists and the Black Guard. He offered to transfer to the Black Guard all the men under his command.
The origins of this offer can be traced to 23 February when an Anarchist called Petr Bars was transferred to Muraviev’s staff as commander of the armoured car “Ivan Merkulov”: the two men seem to have got on well. On his return to Moscow on 12 March, Bars stated that he intended to join the Black Guard.  

Muraviev already seems to have had in mind that he would do the same, because on 15 or 16 March, Bars, accompanied by another Anarchist Lucille Zvanger, visited the Anarchist leader Lev Chernyi. Zvanger feared that Muraviev might be about to undertake some sort of provocation by offering the Black Guard reinforcements and warned Chernyi to take care. On Muraviev’s arrival in Moscow, he had a chance meeting with Chernyi, who had come to Muraviev’s train to hold talks with one of his Anarchist comrades. From this encounter, Muraviev learned not only that the Black Guard had plans to send up to 10,000 men to fight the Germans, but that the Moscow Commissariat for Military Affairs had agreed on 22 March that the Anarchists could be armed. Thus nothing he proposed in the way of reinforcing the Black Guard could be construed as a provocation in the way Zvanger had feared. Indeed, Muraviev at once transferred two of his machine guns to the Kiev and Kharkov Anarchists “for use against the Germans” with no eyebrows being raised.

On 25 March, Muraviev decided to go further and to transfer all those who had fought with him in Ukraine to the Black Guard. *Cheka* interrogations of those Anarchists arrested on 11-12 April give two slightly different versions of what happened. One of the Anarchists detained for interrogation was Jānis Birze of the Liesma group of Latvian Anarchists. His interrogation was later summarised by Dzierżyński, who claimed that Birze had stated that Muraviev had suggested to the Anarchist leader Lev Chernyi that he could both arm the Anarchists, and provide them with 16-17,000 men “in order to overthrow Soviet power”; this last comment seems likely to have been a secret policeman’s interpolation of what was actually said. The second interrogation, of Iakov Novomirskii, suggested that Muraviev had turned up at the Anarchist Federation, declaring himself to be an Anarchist and asking to join the Moscow Federation. He had then said that he had 15,000 soldiers at his disposal and proposed deploying them to strengthen the Black Guard. The Novomirskii interrogation made no mention of overthrowing Soviet power: in his account the context for the provision of the 15,000 men was that of strengthening the Black Guard in the fight against German and world imperialism. If Novomirskii’s testimony is accurate, the
Anarchists made no effort to hide Muraviev’s offer. In Novomirskii’s account, the Anarchist leadership immediately informed Muralov and the Moscow military command about what Muraviev had proposed. Having received arms from the Moscow command before, they clearly wanted to maintain a good working relationship. Indeed, Muraviev’s offer was discussed quite widely. Bars informed Zvanger that the offer to provide 15,000 men had been made as expected and he also informed the Left SR Nataliia Lisovskaia. She was sceptical, dismissing the idea as Muraviev’s “bragging”: he had returned to Moscow with just his immediate staff, and he had left behind a core of only some one thousand men; 15,000 men had to be an exaggeration.

Whatever the precise figure, Muraviev’s offer had the potential to transform the size and fighting capacity of the Black Guard. After the April events, the Anarchists claimed that their Black Guard had been divided into 50 units with a total strength of 2,000. This figure conflicts with Chernyi’s assertion to Muraviev at his meeting on the latter’s train that he had 10,000 men at his disposal. Probably the figure was between the two, Chernyi was exaggerating and after the Bolshevik action the Anarchists were keen to underestimate the threat the posed. Muraviev too could have exaggerated with his claim of 15,000 disciplined men, but even if it were only one thousand those battle-hardened troops could have transformed an urban militia into a real fighting force. And this force would not have been deployed in Moscow, but following the decision of the Black Guard Secretariat, reported on 4 April, it would be concentrated at the front. The potential for disrupting the demarcation line between Soviet Russia and German occupied Ukraine would have been enormous.

There may or may not have been an Anarchist conspiracy to overthrow the Bolsheviks, but if the Muraviev story is accurate, then there was, at least in embryo, a conspiracy to disrupt the peace with Germany – and to the Bolsheviks, acting against the Treaty of Brest Litovsk would indeed have been counter-revolutionary. In his memoirs Maksimov noted that “the formal cause of Bolshevik enmity” was the existence of the Black Guard. Maksimov chose not to elaborate this point since he saw the Bolsheviks’ hostility to Anarchism as stemming as much from an inevitable ideological incompatibility, rather than from any specific policy disagreement. However, accepting this “formal cause”, it is likely that the true audience for the piece
of theatre staged for Bruce Lockhart on 12 April was not the British diplomat but Count Wilhelm von Mirbach, the German ambassador. Appointed on 2 April, Mirbach handed over his credentials on 26 April, by which time the Black Guard had been removed from the scene and could no longer pose a threat to the Treaty of Brest Litovsk.

The Anarchist organisation in Moscow struggled to survive the Bolshevik onslaught of 11-12 April and by June it had effectively been wiped out. The disarming of the Anarchists was debated by the Soviet Executive on 15 April. Ge protested at the killing of some of his comrades and the detention in appalling conditions of others. Sverdlov responded on behalf of the Soviet Government, arguing that the Bolshevik action had not been taken against Anarchism but against banditism: it was a matter “of gold and silver, nothing to do with Anarchism”. On these grounds he was able to convince the Soviet Executive that the matter was not one for urgent debate since no political persecution was involved; discussion could wait until the Cheka had concluded its investigations. The Anarchist Federation met in a very weakened state on 25 April, some ten days later than planned. The meeting discussed the need to find a new editorial home for Anarkhiia, discussed the fate of its arrested comrades and bemoaned the fact that none of the material confiscated by the Bolsheviks during their action had been returned. On 29 April, the Anarchist Federation it managed to organise a protest meeting at the Vvedenskii People’s House, which condemned the government action, demanded the release of those arrested and asked that Dom Anarkhiia be returned. By then twenty five of the arrested anarchists had announced that they were on hunger strike in the Butyrka Prison.

One of those on hunger strike, Birze, recalled that “after several days of torture in the cellars of the Kremlin and behind the walls of the Butyrka Prison”, those Anarchists deemed “ideological revolutionaries” were released, leaving only proven “bandits” detained. However, the back of the Anarchist movement had been broken. A general meeting of the Anarchist Federation was planned for 6 May in the Poets’ Café in an alley off Tver Street; it would be a closed meeting “in view of the seriousness of the situation” and would discuss how to operate the federal secretariat and the local groups in the current climate. It is not clear whether the meeting ever took place. On 18 June it was announced that Anarkhiia was to be investigated by the revolutionary
tribunal for the press because of its “provocative and inaccurate” coverage of events, and Izvestiia reported on 2 July that the paper had been closed by the Cheka Presidium. The attempted Left SR insurrection a few days later and the Bolsheviks’ increasing use of terror meant that there was no likelihood of the Anarchists ever renewing their informal coalition with the Bolsheviks.

Although Avrich did not explore the events of April 1918 in any depth, he did comment on the formation of the Black Guards, stating that with this move the Anarchists went “beyond their irritating verbal assaults [and] were beginning to present a more tangible danger”. The Black Guard was established “partly in preparation for the anticipated guerrilla war against the Germans,” he observed. This simple statement, which Avrich leaves entirely undeveloped, seems to have been the crux of the matter. A guerrilla war against German forces, launched by Black Guards and Muraviev’s disaffected supporters, was the last thing that the Bolsheviks needed as the Treaty of Brest Litovsk came into force and Mirbach arrived in Moscow. Pre-emptive action was essential.

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3 This is the perspective of the veteran Anarchist leader Alexander Berkman in his The Guillotine at Work (Alexander Berkman Fund: Chicago, 1940).

4 Writing in French a few years after Avrich, Alexandre Skirda covered similar ground with Kronstadt 1921 – Proletariat contre bolchéchevisme (Paris: Editions de la Tête de Feuilles, 1971) and Les anarchistes dans la révolution russe (Paris: Editions de la Tête de Feuilles, 1972). With Jacques Baynac and Charles Urjewicz he also published the documentary collection La Terreur sous Lénine (Paris: Le Sagittaire, 1975). In his Marxism and the Russian Anarchists (San Francisco: Germinal Press, 1977), Anthony D’Agostino explores the ideological clash between Russian Marxism and Russian Anarchism, starting with the clash between Bakunin and Marx. Chapter Five explores the writing of Grigorii Petrovich Maksimov, who features below, pointing to the differences between French and Russian Syndicalism, and the disagreements Maksimov had with other Anarchists. Maksimov’s support for the primacy of factory committees over trade unions and his belief in the need for a third revolution are referred to by D’Agostino, but the practicalities of implementing such ideas are not the concern of this author who concentrates on the realm of ideas.


8 Kommuna, no. 3, May 1917.


12 Avrich Anarchists p. 92.


16 Avrich Anarchists, p. 98.

17 Svobodnaia kommuna 17.9.17.

18 Smith Red Petrograd, p. 144.


21 Voline Unknown line 2639.


24 Smith Red Petrograd pp. 211, 235-6,


26 Voline Unknown, line 3700.

27 Trud i volia, no. 1 December 1917.

28 Khudaikulov Bol’sheviki p. 19.

29 Khudaikulov Bol’sheviki pp. 95-6.
30 Voline Unknown lines 3566, 3876 (note 12).


33 Rabinowitch Bolsheviks, pp. 175-8.


37 Partiia Levykh Sotsialistov Revoliutsionerov: Dokumenty i Materialy (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2000), two volumes, vol. 1, p. 334.

38 Voline Unknown line 2991.

39 Khudaikutlov Bol’sheviki p. 61.

40 Avrich Anarchists, p. 123.

41 Voline Unkown line 2975.

42 Khudaikutlov Bol’sheviki pp. 61, 72.


44 Maximoff The Guillotine, pp. 405-05.

45 Dokumenty i Materialy pp. 214-15. For the Anarchist in the Soviet administration, see Maximoff Guillotine p. 408.

46 Khudaikutlov Bol’sheviki p. 42. I am grateful to John Massy Stewart for the information on Vilenkin.


48 Maximoff, The Guillotine, p. 408.


50 Dokumenty i Materialy p. 214.

51 Anarkhiia 7.3.18.

52 Dokumenty i Materialy pp. 216-18.
53 Avrich Anarchists, p. 124.

54 Dokumenty i Materialy p. 218


56 Pravda 3, 4&6.4.18.

57 Khudaikulov Bol’sheviki p. 41.

58 Dokumenty i Materialy p. 219.

59 Peters “Vospominaniia”, p. 375.

60 Pravda 4, 11.4.18.

61 Dokumenty i Materialy p. 220-21; Anarkhiia 6.4.18.


63 V. A Grinevich & L V Grinevich Slidcha sprava M A Muravieva: Dokumentovana istoriiia (Kiev, 2001) p. 305. I would like to thank Andrei Ganin for alerting me to the existence of this publication of the documents produced by the inquiry into Muraviev’s arrest.


65 Ia Ia. Peche “Avtobiografia: no. 40” in Gvardeitsy p. 276. This is a reprint of Pieče’s own account of his life, held in RGASPI f.124.op.1.d.1495 ll.5-23. As following footnotes show, Pieče also made several attempts at getting his life story published, and these versions are held in the Latvian State Archives.

66 Latvian State Archives (Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs) fonds 45, aprakts 4, lieta 24, lapa .98, 106. Hereafter LVA 45.4.24.98, 106.


68 Slidcha p. 256.

69 Slidcha p. 287, pp. 304-5; LVA 45.2.1.12, 110.

70 A Short Account of the Anarchist Black Guards and their Suppression by the Bolsheviks in Moscow in 1918 Anonymous – http://wp.me/pyR3u-445

71 Dokumenty i Materialy p. 221.

72 Peters “Vospominania”, p. 375.

73 „Dokument: No. 20: Iz vospominaniia M F Tselova” in Gvardeitsy, p. 51.

74 Birze & Ruff “Trouble in Moscow”.

75 Dokumenty i Materialy pp. 226-7, 232-1; A Short Account.

76 Dokumenty i Materialy p. 228.

77 Khudaikulov Bol’sheviki p. 42. I have been unable to establish if the mansion occupied on 9 April was the same as the one the Anarchists were forced to vacate a week earlier.

79 Pravda 13.4.18.

80 Dokumenty i Materialy pp. 224-30.

81 Slidcha p. 250, 287.

82 Slidcha p. 261.

83 Slidcha pp. 305-6.

84 LVA 45.2.12.120.

85 LVA 45.2.12.121a.

86 Slidcha, p. 261.

87 A Short Account.


89 Khudaikulov Bol’sheviki p. 44.

90 Dokumenty i Materialy p. 250.

91 Birze & Ruff “Trouble”.

92 Dokumenty i Materialy pp. 246-7, 250.

93 Avrich Anarchists, p. 124.