Hostages of the Gun: Militancy vs Militarism

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Political violence is a delicate topic—and not only because of how easy it is to find ourselves getting criminalized for conversations among comrades about violence.

Violence is something to take very seriously, since how we choose to use or respond to it shapes our struggles and ourselves. I do believe violence changes us, for better or for worse. We can't choose to escape the violence of capitalism, and likewise the violence of colonization, racism, and patriarchy is inescapable for many. We can, however, choose how to use violence in our struggles against those forces.

Often, in anarchist spaces, I hear questions of violence being dealt with lightly, or even as jokes. But I don't think we should joke about killing cops or nazis or whatever, because these are things revolutionaries around the world have chosen to do. They have done that after much serious deliberation. And those actions were not jokes, whatever else we might think of them.

When we treat political violence as a joke, we are saying it is unrealistic or impossible or ridiculous, which is the opposite of true. Every instance of revolutionary social change involves, in one way or another, overcoming the existing power system—and this always involves some level of violence. There aren't a ton of examples of successful recent revolutions, but if we look at the Arab Spring revolutions of the early 2010s, we can get a sense of the different degrees of violence revolution can entail.

The Tunisian revolution and Egyption revolutions were on the less violent side of that cycle of uprisings, but still involved burning buildings and street fighting. Organized armed formations played a relatively small role, and the majority of activity looked like an exceptionally combative street protest movement. I'm going to throw a few numbers at you, just to give a sense of the scale of violence these revolutions entailed. 318 people were killed in 28 days Tunisia and 846 in just over two weeks in Egypt. These are shocking numbers and speak to the courage and determination of the revolutionaries.

Both these revolutions were successful in ending the political regimes in their respective countries, although they did not defeat the state. Today, Tunisia has a relatively effective representative democracy for its capitalist economy (though it does seem to be in a bit of a rough patch), while Egypt is back under military dictatorship and in a worse situation than before the revolution.

If we look at the Syrian revolution in terms of violence, though, we can see a totally different reality. By January 2013, almost two years after the start of the uprising, 60,000 people had been killed. This number rose to over 90,000 by April of that year, and one year later, in August 2014, it was at 190,000. This is right around the time major foreign interventions started, so as of this point, 90% of those killed had been killed by the Syrian state. We should also recall that at least 82,000 people were abducted by the state and disappeared, and about 14,000 are confirmed to have

died under torture.[1]

The Assad regime was comfortable with demolishing whole cities that escaped its control, most famously Homs, which had been Syria's third largest city. It also carried on lengthy sieges against revolutionary regions, such as the Palestinian refugee community, Yarmouk, in Damascus.

The Assad regime survived and today controls almost its full territory again. Still, I wouldn't say that the Syrian revolution was a failure, because two major social revolutionary projects emerged out of it.

One is Rojava in the northern, Kurdish-dominated regions, which is inspired by democratic confederalism. This means it is not attempting to create a new state, but rather a tapestry of local democracies.

The other is the movement of local councils across the rest of Syria, which saw hundreds of autonomous self-governing councils emerge in liberated areas. This reached a peak in 2016, before the intervention by Russia targeting these areas, with at least 395 councils operating. These councils were politically diverse, with some being representative democracies, others direct democracies, and others based on volunteering for roles. The first local councils were started by anarchists, and the model was designed as an emergent alternative to a centralized state that was resilient in the face of repression.

Both of these projects were heavily shaped by the level of violence involved in the Syrian revolution and civil war, but especially the local councils. This is because the single-party in charge of political and military matters in Rojava struck a deal with the Assad regime early on and so never had to fight the state. I'm going to focus on the areas outside of Rojava today, and that's for a few reasons:

One is this experience of unrelenting violence from the state, which helps get at some of the points I want to make. Another is the greater political diversity in the absence of a singular, militarized party. Finally, because the Rojava project was never trying to destroy the state, which, as one Syrian anarchist put it, is the most important thing if you want to have a revolution.[2]

The Syrian revolution liberated millions of people from the regime and created a patchwork of autonomies across the territory in a series of experiments I think we should all think more about. But before we look more closely at the Syrian

[1] The figures in this paragraph about deaths in Syria come from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/SY/HRDAGUpdatedReportAug2014.pdf. The figures about those disappeared are from the Syrian Network for Human Rights: https://snhr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/By_Acknowledging_the_Death_of_836_Forcibly_Disappeared_Syrians_at_its_hands_the_Syria The figures from Egypt and Tunisia are just from Wikipedia though.

[2] From the 2016 text The Most Important Thing. "'The most important thing,' my friend said on our way home, 'is to destroy the state. The Syrian revolution went very far and a big reason for this is that we were able to completely destroy the state in many areas. Even if we can' t prevent the counter revolution, destroying the state makes whatever comes after much weaker."' https://north-shore.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/themostimportant.pdf

revolution, though, I want to circle back around to the title of this text: militancy vs militarism.

As anarchists, when we engage in struggle, we have a few special priorities. One is to struggle in an anti-authoritarian direction and avoid creating new leaders or representatives, and one part of that is avoiding specialization–especially around something as delicate as violence. My goal with this text is to present some ideas about why specialization in violence is a problem and how it favours authoritarian currents, undermining our goals as anarchists.

Rather than forming specialized armed groups, I think anarchists should encourage self-organization and the generalization of both tactics and the means of carrying them out safely. This means teaching people how to do things and also how to not get caught doing them. These tactics can include whatever tactics anarchists consider effective and appropriate based on a careful analysis of their context.

It is possible to wage a determined struggle in the face of state violence without copying military structures or reducing the rich terrain of social struggle to its military dimension. Put another way, it is possible for our struggle to be based on affinity and informality, even in violent contexts, and for us to understand the terrain of struggle as fundamentally social, even as social relations are also held up by material structures that may need to be destroyed.

Militancy means determination to go the distance, fighting spirit, uncompromising in our politics, commited to struggle, pushing the limits of what's possible. As comrades in Common Cause pointed out in their journal Mortar, militancy is a collective reality, something that needs to be cultivated across large groups or even classes of people to allow them to become a force.[3]

Militancy increases through self-organization—through the ways people organize themselves around action. This is in opposition to hierarchical forms of organizing, where those with power control how others are organized. Capitalism is one example of this, where economic forces and hierarchies determine social organization, and the state is another.

Militarization, on the other hand, refers to the forms of social organizing that stem from a military approach to struggle. A military approach to struggle focuses on the use of armed violence as the vector of social transformation, with a focus on winning engagements with the state, taking and holding territory, and winning through attrition.

A small group can choose to emphasize the military dimension of struggle independent from the class or communities they are part of, escalating their tactics into armed struggle without trying to raise the level of militancy of the class as a whole. This comes with various forms of social organization, like command chains and leadership structures, clandestinity, and vanguardism (the idea that a small group

[3] In the article Canadian Bacon: Opposing policing and state power in Mortar #3: https://north-shore.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/mortar3.pdf

of dedicated people can lead a revolutionary force).

Militarization is a specialized approach to violence that de facto excludes that large majority of people who are unable or unwilling to be part of an armed struggle. It tends to reduce the terrain of struggle to a war of attrition with the state, which also serves to situate the armed resistance as the leaders over the resistance as a whole, further entrenching hiearchy and marginalization.

In their amazing book about the Syrian revolution and civil war, Burning Country, Leila al-Shami and Robin Yassin-Kassab describe militarization as struggle becoming about "the scramble for weapons and money" that "transformed the revolution from a leaderless movement into a cacaphony of a thousand competing leaders, from horizontalism to a jostle of hierarchies."

The shift to the military domain meant the struggle played out more on the state's terms, as it had an airforce, artillery, and thousands of well-trained, loyal fighters. This led one Syrian revolutionary quoted in the book, Yara Nseir, to say that the idea of capturing land and building revolutionary territories was the wrong approach, since it favoured a more violent struggle and required support from foreign states.

We need to point out though that in Syria, the state really led the way in terms of escalation, deploying massive violence against demonstrators from the very beginning. This led Robin and Leila to conclude that: "Militarisation was not solely a natural human response to regime brutality; it also grew from the logical realisation that civil resistance was not enough, that the regime would only go if forced." It is possible the Syrian revolution had no choice but to militarize, but it is still worth considering the consequences of being forced into this position.

In the book Revolutionary Echos from Syria, two anarchists from Aleppo discuss the first years of the Syrian revolution and how their areas came to fall outside regime control. They describe how armed struggle started with a handful of individuals who happened to have guns and who would come to defend demonstrations, exchanging fire with the security forces to give demonstrators a chance to get away. It was one role among others, and, in a country with mandatory military service, one a lot of people could fill. Other people pushed back against the security services with rocks and molotovs — guns weren't the only tactic.

As armed struggle against the regime grew in intensity, the two comrades noticed that the majority of revolutionaries—themselves included—were losing their agency. The struggle was coming to be defined by the use of guns, and those with the guns were increasingly determining what happened. They covered their neighbourhood with posters calling for people to choose the molotov over the kalashnikov, to choose a violent civil resistance over militarization.

Soon, though, their area was liberated by the Free Syrian Army, a coalition of armed groups that came from outside the city. The regime forces were pushed out or withdrew, but then they surrounded the area with checkpoints and began shelling

it. This forced the non-militarized revolutionaries into the role of humanitarian workers, trying to coordinate food, shelter, and medicine for people displaced by the mounting violence.

Armed groups felt they should be in control of liberated areas because of the risk they were taking. "There was a lot of conflict between the two groups, those who held onto the values and principles we had put forward at the start of the revolution, that this wasn't a matter of vengeance, that it's not a personal grudge against the regime, that it is not against the Alawite sect." In the comrades' opinion, the separation between the Free Syrian Army and the activists is what led to the collapse of the revolution—it became a movement of free generals, of army defectors, rather than one of free people.

It is not that these comrades were pacifists—far from it. They were militants who didn't shy away from situations of violence. But the specialization of violence left them with no choice but to leave the country. This was especially true for a lot of women revolutionaries, as the comrades interviewed in the book experienced. As the armed struggle took over, so did conservative religious ideologies, and in many revolutionary areas, women found themselves struggling on two fronts — against the regime, yes, but also against the rigid patriarchy of the armed groups.

One of the comrades describes that as she fled to Turkey, a fighter stopped her car to check everyone's passport, but then refused to look at hers because he didn't want to see a woman's face. To become literally invisible in a struggle you had sacrificed so much for must be devastating. This increasing role of religion might have been a dynamic anyway, but it was aggravated by the way militarization required support in money and weapons from abroad—and guess who the Gulf theocracies decided to finance.

The armed struggle and the rise of conservative religion within it laid the groundwork for the sectarian and religious turn the conflict came to be characterized by civil war. Some people like to write off the Syrian revolution by claiming it was always led by religious extremists, but this dynamic only became dominant as the level of militarized violence increased.

The political theorist and revolutionary Yassin al-Haj Saleh said it's more accurate to think about there being three currents in the Syrian conflict rather than distinct phases: a revolution, a civil war, and a proxy war. All of these elements were present starting in 2011, but they were each dominant in different places and times and had a shifting relationship to each other. How long the revolutionary current held on is hard to say. If I had to say though, I'd say the door to revolution was closed after the fall of free Aleppo in late 2016 in the face of collaboration between the Assad regime, the Russian military, and the Rojava militias.

The anarchists comrades in Revolutionary Echos from Syria noted that revolution always contains contradictions and struggles between different currents, including between reactionaries and those who want to take the revolution further.

This is echoed in a recent text from France responding to an article in the German anarchist journal Antisistema, where (discussing Ukraine) the authors argue that it is easy to position yourself above the messiness and contradictions of violent struggles when at a safe distance. But for an anarchist engagement to be possible, you have to wade into the mess, pick sides, and continue looking for liberatory potential even if collaborating with groups that aren't liberatory in nature.

I want to pivot again and look at another example of armed struggle, this time in a western democracy. The Syrian revolution is a major reference point for my politics, and another big one is the autonomous movement in Italy in the 60s and 70s. This movement was strongly revolutionary and built a real counter-power to the state and corporations, going way beyond what was achieved in the short-lived but more famous May '68 in Paris.

The autonomous movement was built in factories, universities, and working class neighbourhoods in an economic and social context shaped by rapid post-war industrialization and migration from the south into the industrial hubs of the north. The best book I've found on the subject is The Golden Horde. If you can get acces to it, I really recommend picking a few chapters to read to get a feel for the theoretical and tactical growth of the most powerful revolutionary movement in a western country of that era.[4]

Two comrades, Franco Tomei and Paolo Pozzi, recalled a sequence of struggle in Milan in 1977. Many of the most prepared comrades had travelled to Rome for a major demonstration against a police killing there, but those who stayed in Milan wanted to take the streets too. Despite the lower numbers and lower preparation, some of the cadres in the march tried to push for a frontal attack on the police headquarters — and on the line of armed police in front of it.

Franco and Paolo write: "It only took a moment for me to realize that all the illegality that we had done so much to encourage as part of the movement was in the process of turning against the movement itself: it was becoming the exclusive domain of those who wanted to abandon any possibility of mass political organizing in order to follow the line of armed organizations and clandestinity." This reminds me of the Syrian comrades I talked about before getting squeezed out of a movement they helped found.

Franco, Paolo, and their crew managed to convince the crowd to go attack an undefended government building instead, but they recall this was the last time the violence of the crowd focused on buildings or infrastructure rather than individuals. A cop was shot and killed during a demo shortly after, and gun fights at demos became the norm. Several demonstrators were killed. They write: "Mass participation collapsed as the level of confrontation and repression intensified."

In the increasing absence of a mass movement, the most militant combattants

[4] I was working from the French edition of the Golden Horde, and all translations to English are mine. The same was true for Revolutionary Echos from Syria.

were more isolated and were increasingly forced underground. There was a vibrant underground network in Italy in 1977. In just that year, there were over 2000 attacks, which ranged from arsons and bombings to assassinations and abductions.

Lucia Martini and Oreste Scalzone descibed armed struggle as an extension of the mass movement, as a way of fighting to the death against the capitalist restructuring that was breaking apart the mass element of the autonomous movement. But they admit this created a context where militants were left with fewer choices — either they worked with the official unions and the communist party to negotiate with the powerful or they went underground.

The Red Brigades were by far the largest underground group. They formed in 1970 and their first attack was a car arson against a company boss in January 1971, though they quickly moved on to larger arson attacks and then to abductions and the killing or injuring of company officials, politicians, and fascists.

In the early days of their existence, a common critique was that their actions were exemplary, meaning they didn't do much on their own and just tried to serve as an example to other militants. This was a problem because the working class was so organized and militant at that period that they didn't need some underground group to show them that violent struggle was necessary. Andrea Colombo notes that many of the Red Brigades' claimed actions were similar to things that were carried out by other political actors or even spontaneously by working class militants.

Although the Red Brigades were still a major force in 1977, even going on to abduct and murder the head of a conservative political party and former prime minister the next year, 1975-1977 saw an explosion of small, nameless underground groups carrying out attacks. The large majority were targeting the property of fascists, politicians, bosses, and university leaders. Toni Negri wrote that "This practice of mass illegality was the best antidote to the existence of armed organizations and the strategy of armed struggle." Small group, clandestine organizing to attack property succeeded in generalizing, while attacks on individuals did not. (Which is not to say that targeted attacks on individuals are wrong and should never be done.)

The article by Common Cause that I mentioned before goes on to argue that increasing militancy requires careful attention to conditions. Pushing for more violent tactics can actually undermine militancy if the mass of people participating in movements find them alienating or hard to understand, or if they push the state to ratchet up the level of violence experienced by all the people in struggle beyond what they are prepared to deal with. Italy in the mid to late 70s is a perfect example of that.

The state responded to the militancy of the autonomous movement through what it called the Strategy of Tension. This involved encouraging rather than suppressing violent struggle with the goal of creating a feeling of insecurity among the population that causes them to want a strong government — the state then used this atmosphere to pass new repressive laws. The Strategy of tension included false

flag attacks carried out by fascists and cops targeting the population.[5] These attacks started even before the existence of the Red Brigades, who at one point went so far as to say that any attack claimed in their name that involved explosives was false flag.

The first major false flag attack was the Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan that killed 17 people. It was determined to have been carried out by a fascist organization to delegitimate the left, but the state arrested over 80 anarchists in response to that event, and even executed one anarchist by throwing him from a fourth floor window during interrogation. (The police commissioner responsible for that execution was later killed by an underground group.)

Like in Syria, we can see that the state favoured a militarized conflict. It wanted to polarize the situation and reduce the terrain of struggle to either armed conflict or institutional reform, which, as we have seen, pushes out most participants.

Sometimes, resistance movements share this goal explicitly, though. One quick example of that is the FLN in the Algerian independence movement, who used attacks on the French civilian population to militarize the struggle, making it easier to consolidate power in their party. The strategy of targeting random civilians was meant to provoke a disproportionate response that only the FLN, as a clandestine armed party, was set up to survive. They even went as far as joining the French colonizer forces in killing other members of the independence movement who didn't fall in line—the FLN killed thousands of their own supporters and other independentists. This successfully left them as the defacto leaders of "The Resistance" and therefore in the best position to capture the state when the French pulled out. The FLN went on to rule as a dictatorship for decades. (I don't want to get into contemporary examples of this, but I'm sure we don't have to think too hard to find examples of the FLN strategy being used by other groups.)[6]

We've covered a lot of ground so far. I hope the arguments have been clear, but I'd like to spell out in simple terms some conclusions. To do this, I'm going to draw on a classic anarchist text, Armed Joy, which was written by Alfredo Bonnano in

[5] It's tricky to talk about false flag attacks, since the contemporary left in North America is so quick to call any militancy false flag or provocation. However, this embarassing situation should not stop us from looking at how they state has approached militancy elsewhere. The Strategy of Tension was the policy of the Italian state, and many false flag attacks have been confirmed.

[6] Most histories of the FLN or the Algerian independence movement will confirm their efforts to consolidate power, but one book is The Insurgent Among Us, by Remy Mauduit. Here is a short review (in an enemy publication) that summarizes it: https://warontherocks.com/2019/04/a-war-to-the-death-the-ugly-underside-of-an-iconic-insurgency/. The FLN notably fought a (rather one-sided) civil war against the Messalists, another Algerian independence party that refused to join them, in which at least 10,000 people were killed. They revealed information about rival groups to the French, so that they could be arrested (one example is the fate of the communist group, Red Resistance). The FLN also extensively used torture against its own members who were suspected of disloyalty. All of this is in addition to the use of indiscriminate violence against noncombattants in order to provoke massive retaliation against the population, liquidating the civil opposition and forcing people to pick sides between the FLN and the French.

Italy in 1977.

Bonnano called for "the generalization of the armed clash" and warned against "the danger of specialization and militarization that a restricted minority of militants intended to impose on the tens of thousands of comrades who were struggling with every possible means." He wanted "to prevent the many actions carried out against the men and structures of power by comrades each day from being drawn into the planned logic of an armed party, such as the Red Brigades."

Bonnano wrote that "a practice of liberation and destruction can come forth from a joyful logic of struggle, not a martial schematic rigidity within the pre-established canons of a directing group." He wrote that the vanguard armed groups fell into what he called the quantitative delusion, in which leaders feel empowered to make stronger demands based on the number of their followers. But he points out that in heightened moments of struggle like May 68, it wasn't numbers that were lacking, but rather the qualitative dimension of struggle—the ideas, the self-organizing, the tactical versatility.

Bonnano calls for people to engage in struggle as though it were play, which is at odds with the quantitative logic of both capitalism and the military party. He imagines new structures based on the self-organization of struggle: these structures "take form suddenly, with only the minimum strategic orientation necessary. No frills, no long analytical premises, no complex supporting theories. They attack. Comrades identify with these structures. They reject the organizations that give power, equilibrium, waiting, death. Their action is a critique of the wait-and-see suicidal position of these organizations."

He continues, "Joy emerges from the play of destructive action, from the recognition of the profound tragedy this implies and the awareness of the strength and enthusiasm that is capable of slaying the cobwebs of death." So if the struggle is to be violent, it is best to engage in it directly, joyfully, without mediation and without the imposition of anyone else's strategy. Because theory emerges from the experience of struggle, it follows action, and destructive actions emerge organically from the experience of oppression, because joy is the opposite of what this society imposes on us.

However, Bonnano cautions that, "Those who use these tools must not become slaves to them. Just as those who do not know how to use them must not become slaves to those who do. The dictatorship of the tool is the worst kind of dictatorship."

This is eerily similar to a quote by Syrian anarchist Omar Aziz, who wrote the foundational text of the local council movement and who was captured and executed by the Assad regime in 2013. He wrote: "In the coming period, the movement will face different threats: that human beings will get tired of revolution and its impact on their material needs and family life, or that an increasing use of weapons will make the revolution a hostage of the gun."[7]

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[7]Here's an English translation of Omar's text with an introduction that puts it in context:

Omar, too, wanted victory through self-organization and by millions of individuals stealing back their daily life from the powerful—this is not done by winning battles. Omar wrote: "It's clear that the more self-organizing grows in power, the more able those deep social bonds will be to defend themselves and others against the repressive violence of the authorities, against moral slippage, and against that the use of arms will slowly make the revolution and society as a whole hostages of the gun."

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https://north-shore.info/2020/09/30/to-live-in-revolutionary-time-on-the-formation-of-locals-councils-by-omar-aziz/

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