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June 28, 2014



Phillip Sansom

Marie Louise Berneri

A Tribute

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Scanned from original.
Zero Number 1, June, 1977, page 9

June, 1977

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Note: *Zero* (Anarchist/Anarca-feminist Newsmagazine) was published in London in the late 1970s.

“We cannot build until the working class gets rid of its illusions, its acceptance of bosses and faith in leaders. Our policy consists in educating it, in stimulating its class instinct and teaching methods of struggle . . . It is a hard and long task, but . . . our way of refusing to attempt the futile task of patching up a rotten world, but of striving to build a new one, is not only constructive but is also the only way out.”

– Marie Louise Berneri, December, 1940

Marie Louise Berneri was the first anarchist I ever met. The first convinced, dedicated, working-for-the-movement anarchist, I mean.

For she it was who opened the door when I rang the bell of the Freedom Press office one day in 1943, when I set out to discover what anarchism was and who the anarchists were.

The anarchist movement turned out to be the place for me, but by no stretch of the imagination could I ever pretend that all anarchists were like Marie Louise Berneri. She was quite exceptional — as a friend, as a comrade, as a militant revolutionary and as a thinker.

When I first met her she was 25, and had already been affected by revolutionary activity for about 20 of those years. Her father was Camillo Berneri, a brilliant anarchist writer and a leading theoretician of the Italian anarchist movement. He was also an activist, and so subject to continual attacks by Mussolini’s fascists that eventually he, his wife Giovanna and two daughters Marie Louise and Giliane, went into exile in France.

That was 1926, and Marie Louise was learning the facts of life for a revolutionary. Ten years later Camillo Berneri left for Spain, first to fight on the Aragon front and then to edit the paper *Guerra di Classe* in Barcelona. During this time Marie Louise made several “journeys of confidence” to Barcelona, on behalf of the comrades in Paris, and was able to see at first hand the achievements of the anarchist Spanish workers, an inspiration which was to stay with her forever, even after the brutal murder of her father by Communists during the May days of 1937.

Towards the end of 1937 she came to London to live with her friend Vero Richards, himself the son of an Italian anarchist long exiled in London. In 1936, when the Spanish Revolution began, no anarchist paper was appearing regularly in Britain until Vero Richards began *Spain and the World*—probably the most influential anarchist paper ever to appear here. Marie Louise was heavily involved in working for the paper, rapidly learning English to add to her native Italian and acquired French and Spanish.

Franco's military victory in 1939 brought some special problems—not least the sudden appearance in London of some 160 Spanish refugees who had managed to escape at the last moment, in need of food, clothing, accommodation and support in every way. Marie Louise threw herself into this very special task of drumming up help for these weary and dispirited comrades, one of whom, Manuel Solgado, was to write later:

“We were morally and physically destroyed. Within a few days a comrade came to take us to the Freedom Press premises, and it was there I first saw Marie Louie, who received us with unbounded happiness. From the very beginning she was at our disposal and moved heaven and earth so that those of us still at the Salvation Army hostel could leave that place. All her interest was centred on our explaining in detail the ins and outs of our struggle. There was one episode about which she asked no questions and about which all of us, without previous arrangement among ourselves, kept silent. I refer to the incidents in May 1937, which were provoked by the Communists and during which the lackeys of Moscow assassinated her father, the dear comrade Camillo Berneri. We knew how painful it would be for her to speak of this period and we always avoided it, and she appreciated our silence.”

The end of the Spanish War brought an end to *Spain and the World*, but that same year the Germans invaded Poland and World War II began. In November 1939 *War Commentary* was launched, and once again Marie Louise and Vero Richards were at the centre of publishing an anarchist paper. The clarity and force of the anarchist position against the war quickly brought support from many anti-war individuals who recognised that there was no point in opposing the economic system which engendered it—capitalism—and the Institution which organised It—the state. In 1940 Marie Louise organised a series of lecture-discussions on

Vero Richards later gathered together over 50 editorials she wrote for *War Commentary* and *Freedom* between 1939 and 1948. Words of wisdom in a mad world, a model of anarchist journalism, illuminated by courage and compassion and summing up in one of her own titles the anarchist attitude to all the post-war power struggles: *Neither East nor West!* Manuel Solgado wrote of her death: “It only remains for me to ask the comrades who shared with her those days of struggle . . . to follow her example.”

old age pensions is ridiculous; to resolve it in terms of insurrection, of overthrow of the ruling class and the power of the State is not enough. Human nature is a whole. The worker is not merely the producer in the factory or the field; he is also the lover, the father. The problems which he faces in his home are no less important than those at his place of work. By trying to separate biological and psychological problems from the sociological ones, we not only mutilate our theories, but are bound to reach false conclusions.”

Showing up the bourgeois cowardice of psychoanalysts like Freud and Jung, who backed away from the implications of sexuality in the face of shocked reaction, she discussed the social and revolutionary importance of Reich’s work and his conclusion: “Sexual repression is an essential instrument in the production economic slavery. Thus sexual repression in the infant and the adolescent is not, as psychoanalysis—in agreement with traditional and erroneous concepts of education—contends, the prerequisite of cultural development, sociality, diligence and cleanliness; it is the exact opposite.”

And she finishes in her own words with: “The importance of Dr. Reich’s theories is enormous. To those who do not seek intellectual exercise, but means of saving mankind from the destruction it seems to be approaching, this book will be an individual source of help and encouragement. To anarchists the fundamental belief in human nature, in complete freedom from the authority of the family, the Church and the State will be familiar, but the scientific arguments put forward to back this belief will form an indispensable addition to their theoretical knowledge.”

Space restricts detailed mention of all those who, as she would have been the first to admit, influenced her development.

After her father, first among these was of course Vero Richards who she lived with for 12 years. Only his enormous resilience and courage enabled him to carry on and finish some of the work she had left undone, for just before her death she had completed her major work, *Journey through Utopia*, a comprehensive scholarly and libertarian consideration of hundreds of writings on utopia down the ages, from Plato’s *Republic* to the American hobo’s *Big Rook Candy Mountain*.

Spain which strengthened this trend by emphasising the constructive aspects of anarchism as demonstrated by the Spanish collectives and the anarcho-syndicalist alternatives to trades unions.

In 1944 I was invited to join the Anarchist Federation, which at that time was a closed shop for obvious reasons. But once things moved very fast, and within a year Marie Louise, Vero Richards, John Hewetson and myself found ourselves in the Dock at the Old Bailey on charges of conspiring to disaffect the Forces—offences which carried penalties of up to 14 years gaol.

That trial is another story, too long to elaborate here. Suffice to say that Marie Louise; much to her disgust, was released on the second day on a purely technical point. For the anarchist movement this was of great importance, for she was able, with co-editor George Woodcock and other comrades, to continue publishing *War Commentary*, which did not miss an issue while we were in prison (we were lucky to get light sentences of 9 months). The war was over and we came out to find comrades working hard to build a movement in the changed circumstances of “peace” time. The paper changed its name to *Freedom*, and expanded to a newspaper sized fortnightly. From 1946, a series of *Freedom* was produced which was, in the opinion of many anarchists, of a higher standard than ever before or since. It lasted three years. On 13 April 1949, Marie Louise Berneri died suddenly of pneumonia. She was 31. Shock ran around the anarchist world. Hundreds of letters poured in from stunned comrades everywhere, and dozens of notices appeared in anarchist and socialist journals. She had corresponded in four languages with journals, organisations or individuals with equal concern and encouragement. She would answer simple questions with as much feeling as she would enter into an involved polemic.

For all her brilliance in every way I never heard her put anybody down or make them feel small. She was a true egalitarian, a true anarchist. Personality cults are an anathema to anarchism. Nevertheless it’s not difficult to see that it’s the presence or absence of personalities which makes the difference as to whether or not we have a dynamic group, an effective paper, or a growing movement: Marie Louise’s personality was the inspiration of the wartime generation of anarchists in Britain.

Marie Louise realised as a propagandist that to get ideas across you have to make them relevant to those you are addressing. As we shall see, she could speak with the authority of an intellectual, but what at all times illuminated her approach was an identification with those she was either addressing or speaking about, and when she was deeply moved to anger or compassion she could write with great fire.

Her own and her family's history gave her good cause to hate the Fascist regime in Italy, but she got no satisfaction out of the fearful bombing of Italian towns by the R.A.F. and the U.S. Air forces during 1943.

"Hamburg, Milan, Genoa, Turin are covered in ruins, their streets heaped with bodies and flowing with blood. . . The Press boasts of the RAF's power to carry such destruction to all the cities of Germany and Central Europe. It screamed with indignation when the Germans bombed churches and hospitals, but when the smell of carnage goes up from beautiful and populated towns they find words of rejoicing. When the water mains were hit in Milan and the centre of the city flooded, they find it a subject for a joke. 'Lake Milan' the clever journalist calls it. What does it matter to him if 'the water is flowing between the ruins and the debris of bombed buildings, and people living in the district were forced to remain in the wreckage of their homes for four days until the water subsided and they could get out. . . 'Lake Milan' is indeed a splendid joke. But while the journalists chuckle in the Fleet Street pubs, the hospitals and rescue squads are working day and night to try and palliate some of the pain and disfigurement, the hunger and exposure of the victims."

Similarly she had every reason to hate the Communists who had killed her father and sabotaged the social revolution in Spain no less than in Russia itself, but her contempt for the rulers of the Kremlin never let her forget that their first victims were the Russian people themselves.

In 1944 she produced *Workers in Stalin's Russia*, a well researched and damning account of the appalling conditions under which the vast majority of workers in Stalin's empire toiled, suffered and died. This was written ten years before Khrushchev was to denounce him. However, while Khrushchev complained about Stalin's treatment of his fellow Bolsheviks, she exposed the true nature of the inequality between, say, the Red Army officer class and the private soldiers, the official black

market, the party control of the unions, the hated Stakhanovite and forced labour systems, and the much-vaunted equality between men and women: "The Russian woman has been liberated to a great extent from the slavery of the family only to become the slave of her work. Before the revolution, she was imprisoned in her family life, submitted to the wishes of her father or husband; and now she has lost these masters only to acquire a more ruthless one, the State. The State has declared her to be the equal of men but that formula is a cynical joke when the means of achieving that equality are denied her. It is not by sweating down the mines; while young men spend their time in offices that women can achieve equality with men."

Marie Louise described the lot of the working class Russian women as being: ". . . submitted to a double inequality. She is not the equal of her male fellow worker because, working as many hours and as hard as he does, she earns less; nor is she the equal of the women and men belonging to the privileged class. She slaves in the factories and mines so that a whole population of bureaucrats can afford to live in idleness. She has to become a servant to rich families in order to avoid starvation. She is badly dressed and poorly fed, so that wives of technicians, officers, GPU officials, can enjoy themselves and dress smartly."

There has been a steady stream of anarchist women challenging established moralities and sexual relationships from Mary Wollstonecraft and Emma Goldman through to the present day. Inheriting this body of thought, Marie Louise was able to study and examine the whole concept of women's sexuality. At that time women's liberation had yet to be seen as a separate struggle.

Her reading of psychology at the Sorbonne added to her revolutionary insight, and enabled her immediately to see the significance of the work of Wilhelm Reich, when the first edition of *The Function of the Orgasm* became available just after the war.

It was Marie Louise who first introduced Reich's Ideas to the anarchist movement—if not Britain itself—in an article titled "Sexuality and Freedom" in the magazine *Now*, published by George Woodcock. She opened with a quote from Reich: "The problem of sexuality permeates by its very nature every field of scientific investigation." She went on: "To reduce these problems to a question of family allowances, maternity benefits or