REVIEWS

Tim Dowdall, *Max Stirner and Nihilism: Between Two Nothings*

Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2024; 282pp; ISBN 9781640141704

Perhaps the most obstinate label that nineteenth-century German philosopher Max Stirner has received is that of 'nihilism'. But is this justified? In *Max Stirner and Nihilism: Between Two Nothings*, Tim Dowdall tackles this long-overdue subject because it is crucial to our evaluation of Stirner's legacy. Dowdall's investigation rests on two pillars. Firstly, he provides an incredibly comprehensive overview of the history and reception of Stirner's only book-length work, *The Ego and Its Own*, from its publication to the present day. Secondly, he critically examines the validity of Stirner's association with the protean tradition of nihilism.

Although initially well-received, T*he Ego and Its Own* was swiftly accused of being a work of nihilism, starting with the banning of the book in Saxony and Prussia. The popularity of Stirner's work has oscillated throughout history, but the label of nihilism has never dissipated. The most significant of these oscillations is the rise in popularity of Friedrich Nietzsche, who has frequently been accused of plagiarising Stirner's work. Since Nietzsche is perhaps the most instrumental thinker in popularising the term nihilism, his relation to Stirner is essential to Dowdall's investigation. Even though the depth of his research into this subject is unsurpassed, Dowdall's conclusion concerning the accusations of plagiarism remains modest in comparison to the evidence he provides. It is hard to observe the uncanny similarity between Stirner's and Nietzsche's work considering the overwhelming evidence provided by Dowdall and still suspend judgment.

The second pillar of Dowdall's investigation concerns how well Stirner fits in the various forms of nihilism, including Nietzsche's own, that of the Russian rebels, and moral, existential, and political nihilism. Dowdall comes to two conclusions here. Firstly, whether Stirner can be considered a nihilist of any sort depends more on those who read *The Ego and Its Own* than on the actual content of the book. For a long time, *The Ego and Its Own* has been a bit of a Rorschach test, eliciting a tremendous variety of positive and negative interpretations. For many who sought a nihilistic villain, Stirner fulfilled this role

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excellently. Secondly, while Dowdall does not entirely disagree with those who provide more substantive interpretations of *The Ego and Its Own* as a work of nihilism, he argues that was an '*anti*-nihilist' (p246). This appears most strongly in his discussion of Stirner's thought in relation to existentialism. Even though there are similarities between Stirner's work and that of Sartre, Camus, or Kierkegaard, particularly concerning the rejection of idealistic, theological, and metaphysical ways of thinking, Stirner does not share with the existentialists a sense of despair or angst according to Dowdall. Rather, he finds in *The Ego and Its Own* a life-affirming message that seeks a completely self-actualised life, especially through the concept of the 'creative nothing'.

Quite uniquely, Dowdall thus sees *The Ego and Its Own* in the first place as a work of positive philosophy, writing that 'Stirner is a champion of individual autonomy, not a prophet of the moral void' (p182). According to Dowdall, we should view *The Ego and Its Own* as an attempt to complete 'the Enlightenment task of eradicating the dogmatic, hegemonic myths that enslave the individual's mind' (p152), following in the footsteps of Hume and Kant. Dowdall further supports this point by highlighting Stirner's translation of the works of Smith and Say, his only literary output after the publication of *The Ego and Its Own*. Though Dowdall acknowledges that 'Stirner's relationship to the Enlightenment is contentious' (p183), and that the Enlightenment could be considered a project of humanism, he claims that Stirner pursues the Enlightenment ideal of 'autonomous self-possession' (p115). This interpretation of Stirner as a late Enlightenment thinker stands in contrast to the view of Stirner as a thinker who moved philosophy away from idealism and rationalism. Through his critique of Feuerbach, Stirner challenged the supposed apotheosis of human reason of the Enlightenment.

This point notwithstanding, Dowdall's *Max Stirner and Nihilism: Between Two Nothings* is phenomenally researched, well argued, and eloquently written. Stirner has been characterised more by his reputation than by the contents of his work, so Dowdall's book is most welcome in severing *The Ego and Its Own* from its ill-deserved reputation. With this book, Dowdall cements himself as a leading scholar on the work of Max Stirner. *Max Stirner and Nihilism* makes for an indispensable book not only for those concerned with the relationship between Stirner and nihilism, but also for anyone who seeks a deeper understanding of nihilism itself.

Dr Jorn Janssen, Telders Foundation

Andrew Whitehead, *A Devilish Kind of Courage: Anarchists, Aliens and the Siege of Sidney Street*

London: Reaktion Books, 2024; 320pp; ISBN 9781789148442

Andrew Whitehead offers a riveting and insightful retelling of the brutal and protracted cat-and-mouse chase between the London police and Latvian revolutionaries turned outlaws in 1910-11 and its aftermath. From the Christmas 1910 Tottenham robbery and Houndsditch shootings leading to the climactic Sidney Street Siege, which saw the deaths of two Latvian revolutionaries and the dramatic intervention of Home Secretary Winston Churchill, the narrative revisits familiar ground in the mythology of London's East End and revolutionary and policing history. Whitehead steers clear of sensationalism while acknowledging the story's many superlatives. Thus, the Tottenham robbery and lethal chase that followed caused the deaths of a policeman and a little boy; the former, William Tyler, was 'the first British police officer to be killed on duty for eight years' (p22), while the Tottenham robbery itself was 'the most grievous single incident in the history of London's police' (p8), 'the most remarkable armed pursuit in London's history' (p25). Meanwhile, '[the Sidney Street siege] was the first time since the Metropolitan police was established in 1829' that police officers opened fire on London's streets (p133). The newsreels of the siege remain to this day 'one of the most spectacular events ever captured on film' (p162). And yet, these events culminated in a trial in which not a single guilty verdict was achieved against those accused of involvement in the Houndsditch murders – partly because most of those involved were dead while others were on the run. Key to all these developments was another superlative: the role of the sensational press and 'new journalism' at its 'potboiling best (or worst)' in the coverage of the events (p161). Down to the involvement of London-based Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta as a witness and possible suspect, and the suspicion that mastermind Peter the Painter might have in fact been French bandit Jules Bonnot, the twists and turns continue until the very last chapter.

Despite such reminders, Whitehead foregrounds facts and analysis in short and incisively written chapters featuring fine illustrations and even two itineraries along the key sites of the story. The many threads of these events and their enduringly mysterious protagonists are skilfully disentangled, which clarifies many debated points. In addition to dealing with the issue of the identity and

personality cult of Peter the Painter and his associates, Whitehead details the often-misrepresented political allegiances of those involved, beneath their blunt characterisation as anarchists. As he notes, the political label, 'was pejorative more than descriptive' and used at every stage to disparage both anarchists and those involved in the robberies and siege. Whitehead also addresses the level of operational command wielded by Home Secretary Churchill during the Siege – and its questionable effectiveness of operational command. A chapter on the poignant stories of the women caught up in the events, through their own likely political pursuits or romantic involvements, offers a welcome exploration of the broader question of women's place in revolutionary groups and radical nationalist movements at the time.

The level of detail and intricacy is occasionally a little overwhelming, although this is testament to the extensive research informing the book and will certainly delight those with a specialist interest in the Siege's extended history. It is also mitigated by lively writing and particularly engrossing passages, for instance about the Jubilee Street Club, a hub of radical immigrant politics, and life in the East End's immigrant circles (including minutiae such as room rentals in private houses). Beyond the dramatic events which form the core of the book, it is also a story of London's East End, as a place of life, love, labour and radical politics. It is lastly about Latvian activism and the international aftermath of the 1905 Russian Revolution, for the protagonists of the events were as per Rudolf Rocker's own assessment, 'desperadoes' created by the repression of the 1905 uprisings (p169).

Like many histories of pre-1914 transnational radical activism, and as the final chapter stresses, *A Devilish Kind of Courage* is acutely topical, even though 'the analogies between then and now are not precise' (p266): it interweaves asylum and migration with policing, black scares, racism and xenophobia. Ultimately, if the renewed calls for tougher asylum and immigration laws which resulted from the sequence of events were short-lived, they paved the way for the 1914 Aliens Restriction Act and its subsequent 1919 modification, whereby foreign nationals found themselves required to register with the local police, putting an end to 'the era of relatively unhindered travel across international borders' (p74; another superlative).

Constance Bantman, University of Surrey

Kate Clark, *Twilight of the Soviet Union: Memoirs of a Moscow Correspondent*

Chesterfield: Bannister Publications, 2023; 370pp; ISBN 9781916823020

Why should anarchists look at a book by a *Morning Star* correspondent? Perhaps because Kate Clark has accumulated experience and insight between 1985 and 1990 as a Russian speaker living with children in Moscow. Being a member of a communist party respected by her hosts, she had ready access to Communist Party and state officials, if not with dissidents.

Clark sketches human details. There was pride in collectivism, for decent medical services and new medical remedies. Some foodstuffs were always of good quality and readily available, food packaging in shops was simpler. Air transport was efficient, Russian was a lingua franca, but other linguistic communities were respected. Yet, while the USSR could send a woman into space it was not 'apparently, capable of producing labour-saving devices [washing machines] to enable women to play a fuller part in the political, social and economic life of that society' (p43). Clark terms the Soviet Union as a democratic, socialist country, despite the fact that 'Soviet' elections were circumscribed, largely asking voters to sanction a single candidate nominated by central institutions. Clark notes that the constituent republics of the USSR had constitutional rights to work together or to secede. So, she cites the secession of the Baltic states as evidence of democracy. The sequence of USSR military interventions and covert operations might suggest otherwise.

Clark's book has a diagram looking at 'Soviet' planning, with downward arrows defining the flow of pressures from top to bottom (p31), without a counterflow from bottom to top. Producers might continue to send out poor goods filling quotas set by planners. The press might highlight complaints. Clark notes that products might be ruined for lack of timely transportation. There were no mechanisms to facilitate change and to allow grassroots power as trade unions instead facilitated management, and managers sought to protect themselves and their system. This was (and is) not unique to the USSR: recently scandals in the British Post Office and Health Service have highlighted that managers of public bodies have sought to cover up gross failings and delay redress. Even Ursula le Guin's classic *The Dispossessed* portrays an anarchist society where there are higher echelons in the academic community and perhaps elsewhere obstructing change.[1]

Clark narrates the break-up of the USSR in some detail and stresses that a great part of the criticism that undermined that system came from within the

Russian Communist Party. Many good features of a collectivist and welfare state were destroyed. But, in my view, the political perspectives presented here are flawed. I would suggest that the break-up of the USSR system reflected changing relations among technical elites, managers and political and trade union bosses. They were ready to adapt to market forces, to introduce new management systems and to acquire ownership. In my view the overall change amounted to a new pattern of management power, rather the destruction of a democratic, socialist system. By 1990 'socialism' was equated with an outdated oppressive system. Support for markets was found even among some anarchists. For example, Vladimir Gubarev, editor of *Obschina* (Community), made a presentation at a meeting of anarchists from East and West, in Trieste, in April 1990, later reprinted in the anarchist journal *The Raven*. He commented that they – the anarcho-syndicalist federation (KAS) – 'hold the view that it would be impossible for our society to reach a normal level of economic development without the introduction of a market economy. We oppose all forms of monopoly. There must be collective forms of ownership (of factories for example) [...]. We oppose the idea of 'state property' but support the concept of 'collective property'. Our support for the free market stems from the fact that we live under a state monopoly. The reality of life in the Soviet Union is that if we reject a free-market economy then we preserve this monopoly'.[2]

Despite its flaws, Clark's narrative of developments and experiences makes for an interesting book. It highlights problems to be overcome if one looks forward to constructing a libertarian socialist framework, beyond markets and state collectivism.

A.W. Zurbrugg, Merlin Press

NOTES

1. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1974).
2. Vladimir Gubarev, 'Soviet Union', *The Raven*, 13 (January-March 1991); 22-25 (p25). See also *Iztok, Revue Libertaire sur les pays de l'est*, 17 (June 1989): 53; 'Soviet anarcho-syndicalism: an interview with a member of the KAS', *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* (Winter 1990-91): 9.