

# What? Anarchists in Egypt!

A short account of the anarchist movement, primarily of Italian migrants, in Egypt before 1916, by Costantino Paonessa.

Over the past century and a half of the Italian language anarchist movement, its militants and groups migrated to all five continents. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it had a significant presence in Cairo and in Alexandria in Egypt.

Around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the flow of immigrant male and female European workers into the countries of the Maghreb and the Ottoman Empire assisted the spread of internationalism and anti-authoritarian socialism, alongside other political persuasions. Yet for a variety of reasons traceable to topics like “the decolonization of anarchism” or Orientalism, as well as the hegemony exercised by certain schools of historiography, their history has been of small concern to historians and activists and has all but slipped into oblivion\*, as witness the case of Egypt, of which more below.

## **Anarchist ferment, 1860-1882**

Whilst the presence of European colonies on Egyptian soil dates back to the Middle Ages, it was only after Muhammad Ali came to power that the flood of migrants from Europe (and further afield) became impressive. Egypt’s rulers launched an intense process to modernize some of the institutions and agencies in Egyptian society; in fact, that process, opened the doors to the immigration of European technicians and a European workforce. Furthermore, up until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century at any rate, the viceroy of Egypt readily granted hospitality to European political exiles who, elsewhere, were in danger of imprisonment or deportation. At the same time, the system of ‘concession’ (the right of foreigners to be answerable to the laws of their own country and judged by consular judges) was often used by the states in Europe to keep individuals categorised as “seriously dangerous” well away from their homelands. Against this backdrop, the early 1860s witnessed the formation of carbonari, republican and Mazzinian groups among the migrant workforce and political exiles, mainly in Alexandria – the key city and port for communications in the Mediterranean – and then in Cairo. By around ten years later, those groups were being invaded by internationalism with the arrival of survivors of the Paris Commune and it is around this time that one Ugo Icilio Parrini (d. 1906) aka “L’Orso” (The Bear) crops up; as early as 1870 Cairo police had him classified as an internationalist. His name will be linked to thirty years of anarchist revolutionary activism. Parrini himself, by the 1880s, became the driving force behind unification of the Italian-language anarchist groups that had a presence in every major Egyptian city and which had a number of chapters, including a women’s chapter. Egypt therefore joined the worldwide internationalist web, trading activists, ideas and publications.

In 1878 a number of internationalists fleeing the repression in the wake of the Benevento revolt arrived in Alexandria: these included the young Errico Malatesta who was reunited there with his brother, Aniello. Errico Malatesta remained in Alexandria for only a short time but returned to Egypt in 1882 when anarchists tried, unsuccessfully, to support Ahmad Orubi’s nationalist unrest; the crackdown on that unrest was followed by the British occupation of Egypt.

## **From doldrums to a fresh boost for revolutionary activism**

Ideological and personal rifts, police repression and, above all, the constant to-ing and fro-ing of militants led over the following decade to a paralysis in the movement, albeit that it never petered out

entirely. By the end of the century, anarchists were reorganizing and playing a leading role in introducing radical ideas and practices to the main cities of Egypt. Ugo Icilio Parrini and Luigi Losi in Cairo and Pietro Vasai, Francesco Cini and Roberto d'Angio in Alexandria, as well as dozens of other militants, gave a considerable boost to revolutionary activism, which was of some concern to the Italian, British and Egyptian authorities.

During the German Kaiser's visit to Istanbul and Jerusalem, an agent of the Italian consulate in Alexandria had bombs made that were smuggled into Parrini's business-cum-political club, to be discovered quickly thereafter by the police. That provided the pretext for the arrest of thirty militants, including Parrini and Vasai; in the end, they were all acquitted on all charges, but only after they had spent a year in Muharram Bay prison. On their release and with the aid of dozens of activists arrived from abroad – including many returning from the Greco-Turkish war of 1897 – the anarchists embarked upon impressive propaganda, political activity and agitational work among the working class. There was a new dynamism in this. In 1900, Luigi Galleani arrived in Alexandria. Promptly arrested while in his hospital bed, he was freed after a month under an amnesty. It seems that it was he that drafted the charter of the Free University of Alexandria which was launched, mainly due to anarchists' efforts, in 1901. The university which was supposed to be characterized by "fraternity and mutual tolerance" was open to all, regardless of nationality, language, religion or gender.

At the same time, the activities of anarchists were focused upon planning new form of organization, struggle and working class struggle virtually unprecedented in the Egypt of that time; new associations and 'resistance leagues' orchestrated strikes, marches and rallies. Anarchist propaganda was stepped up through the launching of study circles and the publication of pamphlets, flyers and newspapers. May Day, the anniversary of the Paris Commune and 20<sup>th</sup> September were consistently used as opportunities to organize meetings and get-togethers of anarchists.

In Alexandria the writer Enrico Pea's *Barracca Rossa* was launched. This was a magazine that was also a rallying point for male and female anarchists and it later became famous for attracting the likes of Giuseppe Ungaretti and the young Leda Rafanelli.

## **Controversies and Internal Disagreements**

However, the movement was afflicted with disunity and very virulent internal differences. The launch in Alexandria of the syndicalist-inclined *Tribuna Libera* newspaper, the creation of Pietro Vasai and Joseph Rosenthal, widened the gulf with Parrini's individualistic anti-organiser current and the Cairo comrades. The latter, in fact, refused to collect funds for *Tribuna Libera* and instead opted to raise money for the *Era Nuova* newspaper that Raffaele Valente had launched in Naples. Later, when the decision was made in Alexandria to launch a paper called *L'Operaio*, the Cairo group replied with *Il domani. Periodico libertario*. The differences spilled over from the ideological into occasional personal attacks. Even an "academic" round of lectures by Pietro Gori at the Free University of Alexandria in 1904 failed to alter that. The disputes and internal bickering were obstacles to political and propaganda activity.

To complicate matter further, in 1906 Parrini ("the great sower" as Enrico Pea described him) died unexpectedly; Parrini had been living in poverty for quite some time. With him perished what was undoubtedly the inspiration behind Italian-speaking anarchism in Egypt.

## **New Anarchist Activism and Unity Achieved after 1908**

Not until 1908 was there a resurgence in anarchist activism. In January that year Vasai arrived in Cairo as the representative of the Alexandria Resistance League, meaning to raise money for striking workers. In November 1908, Vasai called a meeting in Cairo's Civil Cemetery, at which approval was given for the publication of a brand new anarchist propaganda paper, *L'Idea*, which published its first edition in March 1909. By that point, Vasai had moved to the Egyptian capital. It was no coincidence that the Italian consul reported to the Interior Ministry in Rome a "*degree of resurgence in the socialist and anarchist camp.*"

The spring of 1909 saw the launch of an Atheist Circle in Cairo, the members of which (its charter reads) "*mean to study, develop and spread all of the truths demonstrated by science and contradicting religious and deist principles*". At the same time, a Free-Thinkers Circle was launched in Alexandria: among its founders was another well known anarchist, Umberto Bambini.

On 4 July 1909, in Cairo's Eden theatre, socialists and anarchists launched the International Federation for Resistance Among Workers. Its aim, as stated in the manifesto drafted also in Greek and Arabic was "*the emancipation of the workers and the immediate betterment of their conditions*". The organization, the manifesto stated "will stand outside of any political, national or religious camp." Shortly after that, on 25 July 1909, the Cairo and Alexandria anarchists, meeting in a bottle plant, decided to call a meeting "to lay the foundations for a final agreement within the anarchist movement in Egypt". That meeting was held on 1 August 1909 at the Alexandria Atheist Circle. After years of division, a sort of an agreed programme had been arrived at. Three hours of proceedings led to the drafting of the final document, entitled *Why We Are Anarchists – What We Want*. The text afforded "*reasonable freedom of action to both organized anarchists and those others who mean to engage in individualist propaganda*". At the same time, it afforded "*the possibility for anarchists to join labour organisations.*"

Albeit short-lived, the unity thrashed out also made an impact through "practical propaganda". When Francisco Ferrer was arrested, a Pro-Ferrer Committee was set up in Alexandria; it included anarchists, socialists from the 'Pisacane' branch, members of the Atheist Circle and of the Free-Thinkers' Circle. When the Spanish anarchist was subsequently sent to the firing squad, a special edition of *Pro-Ferrer* was issued, numerous public demonstrations were mounted and a stone erected in the civil cemetery.

Anarchists also resumed organizing and getting involved in labour struggles. The leagues bounced back, especially those formed by the printworkers and cigarette-makers. There was a fresh emphasis on marking anniversaries as a way of boosting propaganda. Public events were organized to mark May Day in 1909 and 1910. In Alexandria, in 1910, a procession making the anniversary of Ferrer's execution defied a ban imposed by the police and a strong police deployment managed only to have it alter its route.

## **Decline**

But within a year, the movement began to decline again. To quote Vasai's words "*the dissension and internal warfare, a blight that especially infects Italy's anarchist camp*" were to blame.

1913 saw publication of one last newspaper, the very appearance of which generated a lot of consensus: *L'Unione* was anarcho-syndicalist and anti-militarist in persuasion. By that point the activism of anarchist militants was being directed into the workers' movement and the promotion of unity "*the first step towards freedom and well-being*" and into the foundation of a single workers' organisation.

Most likely because of the war, the paper was shut down in 1914. Vasai was hauled before the courts again along with the anarchist Macri, for “defending regicide”, on which charge he was acquitted before he quit Egypt, suffering from TB, on 7 July 1916. With his departure it can be argued that the history of the Italian-language anarchist movement in Egypt had reached an end. There were many reasons for this.

The war led to a tightening-up of British surveillance and put paid to the concessionary arrangement. The rise of Egyptian nationalism (which had always been inimical to radicalism, especially class-based radicalism), the launch of the Socialist Party (the creation of Joseph Rosenthal) or, after the Russian Revolution, of a Communist Party, as well as fascism’s accession to power in Italy, delivered the coup de grace to the anarchist movement. In the 1920s anarchists progressively withdrew from political activity, many of them returning to their homelands; a few were expelled, like the syndicalist Giuseppe Pizzuto. Others, whilst not abjuring their ideals, retreated into private life.

Costantino Paonessa.

Translated by Paul Sharkey

\* See I K Makdisi’s interesting book *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860-1914* (University of California Press, 2010)

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