

Shays' rebellion, 1786



A short history of the "Shays' rebellion" in Massachusetts in the wake of the American Revolution, in which many poor farmers and war veterans attempt to shut down the state's courts in protest at the debt burden on veterans and high taxes on farmers.

Preface

For an anarchist the real history of any country is the history of those people who find themselves in conflict with the government, a conflict which is often unexpressed except in the acts of those who are fed up to the point of rebellion. There is no period in the history of any land when many of the people haven't found their interests different from those of the state. There is no period in the history of any country where some of the people are not in outright revolt for the right to control their own lives. It is true that sometimes it seems to be only a trickle but at other times it reaches floodtide proportions.

United States history as presented in textbooks is aimed at government funded high schools and universities. In the history they present, full accounts of those who have opposed the government are generally repressed. Many incidents of real peoples' history are omitted. Others are treated briefly and summarily dismissed. Those involved in genuine protest or rebellion are often referred to as misled, misfits, or madmen.

In most history books there is an elitist bias which romanticizes leaders, kings, generals, politicians and dramatizes their role without mentioning the struggles of the common people for the necessities of life and control over their own existence. Most history books, whether of a liberal bourgeois or "Marxist" bent, ignore the real struggles of the people and instead glorify this or that government and its leaders.

There is a great need for good anti-establishment history, for the return of that which has been repressed. This is not to say we need to view history as a spectacle for our entertainment, or as an escape from reality into the glories of the past.

If history has any use it is for the living, for examples and encouragement, to show us what is possible. In history can be found models of the way things might be done to change the

future, and models of what has failed; and errors not to be repeated. The resurgence of the repressed in history can give strength to the anarchist, the radical, and those who would struggle for control of their day-to-day lives. If we learn well from history we know we are not alone, we have never been alone, and the future is ours if we make it so. It is for the living generation to fulfill the repressed and forgotten attempts at rebellion, at revolution, at taking possession of our own lives.

In issuing this pamphlet on Shays' Rebellion, we at Solidarity Books hope we are issuing the first of what will be many pamphlets bringing forth the repressed in history in the United States. We hope those living elsewhere will take possession of the repressed in history where they live and share that with us.

The time is particularly ripe for anarchist accounts of the American Revolutionary period and afterward. Nixon has already set researchers, paid by the government, to the task of preparing for the Bi-Centennial of the American Revolution, 1776-1976. In the works are a pro-nationalist, pro-patriotic, pro-government propaganda campaign distorting the events of the American Revolution to government purposes.

An organization called the People's Bi-Centennial Commission is planning opposition to this move by the government, by making plans for what amounts to a counter-propaganda campaign by radicals. This seems to us a good idea, worth serious consideration. However, from what little is known about the People's Bi-Centennial Commission, a lot of their material is likely to be nationalistic, and at worst authoritarian Marxist-Leninism wrapped in the flag to make it palatable.

The repressed is surfacing, people's history is needed, but who shall write it? Here's hoping that many anarchist brothers and sisters attempt it!

As to the account of Shays' Rebellion that follows, Shays' Rebellion is but one incident in a historic current. In the western regions of the coastal states, on the frontier, lived farmers who were in great debt and burdened by distant and unresponsive governments during the depressions preceding and following the War of the Revolution. Under British or American government there was little relief for those suffering under heavy taxes and excessive rents. There was a period of about fifty years of economic exploitation and discrimination by East Coast rulers. The farmers participated in many disorders and upheavals from the 1740's, when the Jerseyites refused to pay rents and Massachusetts men marched in Boston in support of a land bank law, until the 1790's, when the Fries Rebellion and the Whiskey Rebellion were fomented by Pennsylvania mountain men. In 1781 there was a mutiny of the Pennsylvania line of the Continental Army against exploiting "gentry" officers, some of whom were executed by their own men. These revolutionary soldiers elected officers from the ranks and continued to fight for the revolution. There were other mutinies at this time.

There were waves of revolts known by such names as The Wars of the Carolina Regulators in North and South Carolina, The Wars of the New Hampshire Grants in New York and Vermont, Shays' Rebellion in Massachusetts, and the Fries and Whiskey Rebellions in Pennsylvania and neighboring states. In many states the western counties were in rebel hands for a number of years. No taxes could be collected and the courts were closed to prevent mortgage foreclosures. In reading the following account, we ask that you see it not as an isolated incident or an aberration, but as a small part of a continuous stream of action by

people to wrest control of their lives from the state.

--D.B.

Shays' Rebellion

Mention of Shays' Rebellion brings to mind a vague memory of a textbook reference to irate farmers with pitchforks. Among the countless instances of suppressed history, Shays' Rebellion is one of importance, as it reveals much of the true nature of the American Revolution, or at least of the aims and ideals of the "Embattled Farmer," who provided the backbone of the resistance to England; as one of the people involved put it, "We have lately emerged from a bloody war in which liberty was the glorious prize aimed at. I earnestly stepped forth in defense of this country, and cheerfully fought to gain this prize, and liberty is still the object I have in view." The rebellion was a defense of the revolution by the people who had made and won the revolution in opposition to the counter-revolution of the merchants, which has gone down in the history books as the real revolution. As a result, suppression of knowledge about the rebellion is necessary in order to cover up the greater falsification of history regarding the revolution as a whole. Nor was the rebellion in any way a localized affair: resistance to the counter-revolution was widespread throughout the country; Massachusetts was merely the place where it was the strongest.

The first thing that must be realized is that the rebellion was not "Shays'." Shays was the leader only in a purely military sense; despite government attempts to label him a dictator (and English agent), he did not want and was not offered political leadership. His rank in the rebellion was the same as he had held in the Continental Army--Captain. Shays had become a Captain in the army over the objection of the more aristocratic officers only after his Company (consisting of his neighbors) refused to serve under anyone else; he was later forced to resign after committing an exceedingly practical but scandalously ungentlemanly act. At the time of the rebellion he was the poorest man in his town, living in a run-down shack on a tiny farm. **

In each town the rebels elected a Captain to handle their military problems (one Captain, Moses Sash, a private in the Continental Army, was Black); all political matters were handled by the people themselves. At the height of the rebellion, the three western counties were divided into 17 military districts, each under a Captain, whose job was to co-ordinate military activities in his area. The only person to rise to prominence as a political leader was Eli Parsons.

The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 required possession of greater wealth as a voting requirement than had the last Royal Charter. Greater amounts of wealth were required as qualifications for each public office of higher importance; some towns did not have a single inhabitant rich enough to be sent to the General Court (state legislature). The Constitution could not be amended for 15 years.

During the years after the revolution, the country was in a very bad economic depression. Large numbers of farmers had their property seized by creditors and were offered the choice between jail, where they would be billed for room and board, or working for their creditors at whatever wage they chose to pay. In a few years, the entire rural population would have been forced into serfdom. A delegate to one of the county conventions said, "I've labored hard all my days and fared hard. I have been greatly abused, have been obliged to do more than my

part in the war; have been loaded with class rates, town rates, province rates, Continental rates and all rates ... been pulled and hauled by sheriffs, constables and collectors, and had my cattle sold for less than they were worth. I have been obliged to pay and nobody will pay me. I have lost a great deal by this man and that man and t'other man, and the great men are going to get all we have, and I think it is time for us to rise and put a stop to it, and have no more courts, nor sheriffs, nor collectors, nor lawyers, and I know that we are the biggest party, let them say what they will."

In western Massachusetts, the stronghold of the rebellion, the government in Boston was felt to be virtually an oppressive foreign government, no better than the one they had just gotten rid of. Half of the western towns did not send representatives to the General Court. Instead, they continued to operate in the same manner as during the revolution, when there was no real government. Local matters were decided at town meetings. When matters of common interest were involved, county conventions were called; in each town delegates would be chosen and given exact instructions as to what position to take on every possible issue; on their return they would be questioned at great length as to what took place. Among the resolutions passed by county conventions were ones calling for immediate re-organization of the state government, the issuance of paper money to be loaned to debtors (an extremely popular plan to end the economic crisis), an end to prosecution of debtors, and reduction in taxes and state spending.

On August 29, 1786, an act very common at the beginning of the revolution was repeated at Northampton, in Hampshire County. The Court of Common Pleas 'was scheduled to meet, with several debtors' cases before it. During the morning, 1500 people came into town from the surrounding countryside, more or less led by Luke Day. When the judges arrived at the court house, they were confronted by ranks of men in Continental uniform, armed with rifles and bayonets. The judges were presented with a petition that claimed the People's right to protest unconstitutional acts of the legislature and "entreated" the court to adjourn until the "minds of the people can be obtained and the resolves of the convention of this county can have an opportunity of having their grievances redressed." The Court adjourned "without delay."

On September 5, the Court was forced to adjourn in Worcester County. Several towns met together to create a court to settle debtors' cases in a manner more favorable to the debtors.

At Concord, in Middlesex, the court was closed on September 12 by armed men, now calling themselves Regulators, with some contingents coming from the western end of the state. Most sinister about this event was the arrival of Job Shattuck the day before at the head of a large number of wagons containing provisions for several days and material for a camp that was built on the Concord Green. The judges were given a statement: "The voice of the People of this county is that [the Court] shall not enter this courthouse until such time as the People shall have redress of the grievances they labor under at present."

Berkshire County, at the western edge of the state, had been the first to close its courts during the revolution and the last to re-open them; it had threatened to secede from the rest of the state when the state constitution was ratified. To the surprise of the officials, the militia actually appeared when called to defend the Court, numbering about 1,000 men in all. Upon arriving on the scene, however, a violent dispute broke out over which side to take. Judge Whiting, a rebel sympathizer who was later jailed for "inciting," suggested they divide into two groups; they did so, 800 opposing the Court, which then adjourned.

In Bristol County, in the southern part of the state, the Court was able to meet but adjourned as a gesture of good will.

In Exeter, New Hampshire, several hundred armed men surrounded the state capital on September 20, planning to keep the legislature inside until it lowered taxes and issued paper money loans. They fled, though, on hearing a rumor that a company of artillery was coming to attack them.

The Supreme Judicial Court indicted 11 people as "disorderly, riotous, and seditious persons." On September 26, it was to meet in Springfield, where a federal arsenal was located. Both were protected by General Sheppard with 900 militia. On the morning of the 26th, 700 men came, led by Shays, his first appearance in the rebellion. All day long, through the night, and into the next day groups arrived from all over the state. The court was unable to try any cases, as all its personnel, including the judges, were needed to protect the courthouse. Finally, as the rebels were preparing an attack, the Court adjourned. Soon thereafter, Congress authorized the stationing of troops in Springfield to protect against "Indians."

The General Court's reaction to all this was to suspend Habeas Corpus, revoke the right to vote and serve on juries for people involved in the rebellion, and pass a Riot Act giving the governor increased powers to put down disturbances. An "Indemnity Act" pardoned all those who took an oath of allegiance and did not commit acts of violence from the time the act was passed. A few vague reforms were passed: the governor's salary was cut, a few changes in the debtors' law, and taxes could be paid in goods. Sam Adams, for strange reasons, was going through an arch-reactionary phase at this time and led the forces of repression (later, after the outbreak of the French Revolution, he would become a revolutionary again).

On Nov. 21, the Worcester Court was again unable to meet. On the 28th, the Middlesex Court was able to meet in Cambridge, across the bay from Boston, with the help of 2000 militia. Job Shattuck tried, unsuccessfully, to organize an attempt to stop the court, was hunted down, wounded, locked up in Boston, and became the rebel-lion's first martyr.

Shays, hearing of Shattuck's capture, sent out a call for aid: "The seeds of war are now sown . I request ... you and every man to supply men and provisions to relieve us with a reinforcement ... we are determined here to carry our point. Our cause is yours. Don't give yourself a rest and let us die here, for we are all brethren." He put his men in old barracks left over from the revolution and began scouring the countryside for guns and ammunition.

On December 5, the Worcester Court was again stopped. That evening the rebels held an organizational meeting, at which the military districts were formed. The most prominent members of the Committee of 17, which consisted of the Captains of the 17 military districts, were Shays, Luke Day, and Joseph Hinds of Greenwich. A "petition" was sent to the governor, demanding the release of all prisoners, a new indemnity act, and the adjournment of all courts until after the May elections, and stating that they were not afraid of death, war, or "the injuries of hunger, cold, nakedness and the infamous name of rebel, as under all these disadvantages they once before engaged and ... came off-victorious."

In January, the governor began assembling an army of 5000 militia, to be commanded by General Benjamin Lincoln. In response the Committee of 17 sent out a call for men to

assemble with 10 days provisions. The objective was the arsenal at Springfield, the only possible source of arms and ammunition to fight Lincoln.

On January 25, 1200 men, the majority veterans of the Continental Army, marched into Springfield, where General Sheppard had 900 men to oppose them. Due to bad weather, many contingents had not yet reached the assembly point, but the attack could not be delayed, as Lincoln's army was approaching,

The rebels stopped 250 yards from the arsenal, demanded Sheppard surrender, and then began to advance. At 100 yards, Sheppard fired his cannons over their heads, without stopping them, then directly into them, killing four men. After a few more were fired, the rebels fled. Until this time, each confrontation had resulted in one side backing down at the last second; as both the militia and rebels came from the same towns and were literally friends and relatives, neither side really wanted to kill anybody, at least at this time. Aside from the cannon, not a single shot was fired by either side.

The rebels retreated north to Pelham, Shays' home town, where they found a large quantity of provisions sent from Berkshire. Lincoln's army arrived a few days later and stopped about ten miles away--passing through Amherst, they found hardly a man in the place, as they were all with the rebels. Negotiations took place between the two armies, the rebels offering to surrender if given a complete pardon.

On February 3, Shays retreated 20 miles to Petersham. Lincoln followed that night and was caught in a blizzard; had the rebels been aware that he was following, they could have destroyed his entire army. Instead, they fled across the New Hampshire border at his arrival.

The rebels officially disbanded and Shays made his way with several hundred others to Vermont, where the government was expected to be more friendly. General Lincoln went west to clean out Berkshire, causing many to flee into New York and Connecticut.

Although the rebels were now broken up, small groups kept up a continuous guerrilla struggle, capturing weapons, freeing prisoners, and destroying the property of government supporters. Across the border in New Lebanon, New York, Eli Parsons began collecting men: "March all the men in your power to New Lebanon without loss of time. Bring arms, ammunition, four days provisions ... with snow-shoes, as many as you can get."

In both Vermont and New York, the rebels were welcomed by the people. The government of Vermont at first openly supported them, but later, afraid of alienating the other states (it was not yet accepted as a state and was claimed by New York), made official proclamations forbidding the people to assist the rebels, without making any attempt to enforce them. A group of Massachusetts militiamen, in Vermont looking for "criminals," was stopped at gunpoint by the people of a town they passed through, who stated, "No person shall be carried from this state! You are in pursuit of the most virtuous of your citizens." In New York, a group of militia that captured a rebel in a raid across the border was overtaken by forty New Yorkers, who freed the captive.

On February 26, 130 men, led by Perez Hamlin of Stockbridge, left New Lebanon to attack Pittsfield, where General Lincoln was. They had heard that all but a few of his militia had left, their enlistments expired. Unfortunately, Lincoln was reinforced before they reached Pittsfield, so they turned south to Stockbridge, where they seized the town's military supplies,

captured several prominent government supporters, and ransacked their homes. They then went ten miles further south to Great Barrington, where they freed the in-mates of the jail, and started back to New York with their prisoners.

On the way back, they fell into a militia ambush; In the ensuing battle, the rebels lost three dead and several captured, including Hamlin, who was badly wounded and eventually died in jail. Also among the captured were Peter Wilcox, whose brother died in the battle, and Nathaniel Austin, who had led a particularly active group of cavalry, both in their early 20s, This is the only time both sides fought it out in an actual battle.

A few days after Hamlin's raid, New York officials sent their militia to clean out the towns on their side of the border, forcing the rebels to move into Vermont and Connecticut. Activities began to die down, but the situation remained volatile.

Elections for the new General Court were held in the Spring; due to the disenfranchisement of the rebel supporters, there were towns with no voters left, while in many others only a few government supporters were left. Except in the places occupied by militia or with strong pro-government factions, the disqualification was ignored: "they chose with an air of insolence to the friends of government and a vindictive triumph over authority the suspected and disaffected characters." In at least one case, a man in jail was elected. For governor, John Hancock, running on a vague program of reform and leniency, beat the incumbent almost 3 to 1; he was, aside from his platform, also preferred because he had made his money before the revolution and thus was not considered a profiteer. Statewide, only one-fourth of the old legislators were re-elected.

In April, after the elections, the Supreme Court, able to meet by virtue of military protection, began trying the captured rebels. In Great Barrington, six persons, captured in Hamlin's raid were sentenced to death. In Northampton, another six, most for the attack on the Springfield arsenal. Two others were to be hung in other counties. The High Sheriff of Berkshire County found a note on his door:

"I understand that there is a number of my countrymen condemned to die because they fought for justice. I pray have a care that you assist not in the execution of so horrid a crime, for by all that is above, he that condemns and he that executes shall share alike ..

Prepare for death with speed, for your life or mine is short. When the woods are covered with leaves, I shall return and pay you a short visit. So no more at present, but I remain your inveterate ENEMY."

A Commission of Clemency, appointed by Hancock, decided to hang only five people: Peter Wilcox and Nathaniel Austin in Berkshire, Captain Jason Parmenter (who killed a militiaman) and Henry McCullough (only thought to be a leader because he was once seen at the head of several hundred men) in Hampshire, Henry Gale (one of the few leaders captured) in Worcester, and Job Shattuck in Middlesex. The date of execution was set for May 24.

Throughout early May, frantic preparations were made to rescue the condemned; guns were smuggled into the state and Several hostages seized. Tremendous numbers of appeals from towns and individuals all over the state were sent to the governor. Wilcox and Austin escaped, were recaptured, escaped again, were recaptured again, escaped a third time ... The executions were postponed to June, then to August.

In the new General Court, the House repealed the rewards offered for the capture of prominent rebels; the bill was blocked by the Senate, a more aristocratic body, not elected by the people. In the fall, it revised the debtors' law to free persons who, in effect, declared bankruptcy. The right to serve on juries was restored to the rebels, a necessity, as many towns were incapable of producing a jury. A general pardon was defeated by the House, 100 to 94.

Throughout the summer things remained fairly quiet. On September 12, the militia was sent home, a new pardon offered, and all prisoners pardoned, except Wilcox and Austin, who were no longer pursued.

In December, however, two men, Charles Rose and John Bly, age 22, were hung. Bly had recruited men for Shays, was captured during Hamlin's raid; released by the Court, he went back to New York, led two raids, and finally took advantage of the new pardon and returned. During the winter raids, he and Rose, of whom nothing is known, took some clothes for a comrade in need. They were charged with burglary and hung. Murder and rebellion were excusable crimes, but not burglary.

In March of 1788, Shays, Luke Day, Eli Parsons, and a few others, who had been excluded from the previous pardon offers, were given pardons. Shays went back to farming, was arrested for debts in 1792, and moved to New York state, where he died in 1825 and was buried in an unmarked grave,

--F.G.

Published by: Solidarity, 713 Armitage Ave. Chicago, Ill. 60614, October, 1973

Taken from <http://recollectionbooks.com/cs/ShaysRebellion.htm>