

JOHANN MOST AND THE 1883 FRANKFURT BOMBING

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On October 29, 1883, a dynamite bomb exploded inside the building of the Frankfurt police headquarters causing considerable damage but no one was killed. The identity of the perpetrator was not immediately clear. The target was police superintendent Dr. Karl Rumpff.¹ With this paper, I am not trying to compare Haymarket with Frankfurt. Rather, my goal is to draw attention to the role of Johann Most and his paper *Freiheit* in both events, and to show that a transnational network of anarchist insurrectionists existed and that they were dead serious about their plans. I also want to stress that the majority of anarchists were peaceful and focused on building their own alternative space—something I’ve tried to document in my book *Beer and Revolution*.²

At the time of the Frankfurt bombing, Johann Most had been living in New York for nine months. He had become an anarchist after a career as a card-carrying Social Democrat. The trajectory of Most toward insurrectionary anarchism is perhaps somewhat familiar, but I need to recall a few developments. He was expelled from Berlin in 1878 as a result of the new sweeping anti-Socialist law prohibiting all socialist activities in Germany, including the production and distribution of socialist literature. A Socialist newspapers had to be produced abroad and smuggled into the country, and then somehow distributed undetected to subscribers (it was not illegal to possess a periodical). The Reichstag passed this law after two attempts on the life of the Kaiser.³

Like many others, Most left Germany for London as an exile. He also felt pushed out by the party leadership who feared his intemperate behavior during a time when laying low was in order. But this tactic was nonsense to the 32-year-old Most. The London circle of radicals

welcomed him and he immediately worked to launch a new party organ to be smuggled into and distributed within Germany.

It's essential to bear in mind this imperative of smuggling and distributing in order to understand later retaliatory actions undertaken by anarchists against the police, esp. in Frankfurt. Smuggling was at first successful through port cities like Hamburg, and overland routes from neighboring countries. Copies were bundled and shipped in cans and bamboo rods, mailed with fake titles, or carried ashore in luggage. The German political police, however, disrupted much of this operation through a network of informants and spies who managed to infiltrate *Freiheit's* London-based publishing circle, and one even got to speak with Most directly and send his report back to Berlin.⁴ In Frankfurt too police intercepted mailings of *Freiheit*.⁵

Another crucial factor during those years of exile was Most's rancor with the mainline socialists who had started their own official organ out of Switzerland nine months after *Freiheit*. In August 1880, Johann Most was unceremoniously expelled from the party. All this prompted Most and his radicalizing circle to devise a separate distribution network consisting of small, secret cells (some armed). This scheme was carried out by traveling organizers like Victor Dave, the Belgian anarchist and close friend of Most, and Theodor Eisenhauer who set up local distribution points.

The leader of the Frankfurt cell was Joseph Breuder, and by August 1880, Most coordinated with Breuder to begin disseminating literature in this Rhine-Main region. It was an arduous task; perhaps only 15 subscribers existed in the Frankfurt area, although the distribution of pamphlets was more widespread.⁶

Police chief Rumpff, who had long been hated by the socialists, was aware of most of this international activity—they certainly knew about Breuder and others in the area (incl. nearby

Darmstadt). In October 1880, Rumpff hired Johann Georg Horsch, a poor man serving in prison, to infiltrate the cell in return for a commutation of his sentence. Horsch was to instigate a plot among anarchists to murder Rumpff so that enough evidence could be gathered to convict the radicals.⁷ There was another plot engineered by Rumpff (through Horsch) to have a cell member (Peschmann) throw acid in the policeman's face. This attempt was never carried out, although Wilhelm Braun, an employee at the Darmstadt-based chemical firm Merck, procured chemicals including sulfuric acid and strychnine.⁸

Then, in December 1880, German police swooped in and arrested 44 cell members across the country, many of them in the Frankfurt area, effectively destroying the distribution network the radicals had built up.⁹ Fifteen of them were accused of high treason (they allegedly distributed illicit literature into army barracks) and were convicted in Leipzig's Imperial Court in October 1881, the first such trial under the Anti-Socialist Law.¹⁰ This was a major blow to exile radicals, many of whom began to embrace more extreme measures. Most was one of them and had in the meantime been jailed for praising the assassination of the Czar in March 1881. Several anarchist congresses called for new tactics to bring the fight to the state using personal deeds using dynamite bombs and other products.

In December 1882, Most moved himself and *Freiheit* to New York where his main goal remained the dissemination of anarchist ideas and tactics into Germany via London and Switzerland. Inspired by Irish and Russian militants, Most published numerous articles (from 1883 to 1886) on how to manufacture and use explosives and poisons, as well as insurrectionary tactics against buildings, monuments, and high-profile human targets. And so while Most continued his battle against Bismarck's Germany from across the pond, some of his American subscribers, esp. in Chicago, also became familiar with new revolutionary methods.

In Frankfurt following the crackdown and the treason trial in 1881, the role of *Freiheit* and anarchism nearly vanished until the attack on the police building on October 29, 1883. A bomb exploded beneath the main staircase on the first floor near the entrance. According to a local newspaper “the staircase was lifted out of place and the separate steps ripped out of the wall, the iron railings, here and there broken up like wires, was suspended in the air; heavy oak doors were smashed to pieces.”¹¹ Only one inspector was lightly wounded from flying glass, even though all police personnel were in the building at the moment of the explosion. Authorities immediately suspected anarchists. The party socialists accused the police of staging this *attentat* in order to institute martial law in the city.

But only two days after the bombing, Most’s *Freiheit* praised the attack and claimed it as an anarchist deed perpetrated by their supporters, stating indignantly that only “semi-idiotic newspaper reporters would declare that this deed originated with the police.”¹² Four days later, the Frankfurt police received a threatening letter after they posted a 1000 Mark reward for catching the perpetrator.¹³ Then, on November 24, 1883, *Freiheit* published the following statement signed by its executive committee: “In order to verify the quality of the dynamite *produced by us*, one of our own has let off a dynamite bomb [*Dynamitpetarde*] on the main staircase of the Klesernhof [police building] in Frankfurt.”¹⁴ In yet another notice, *Freiheit* alluded threateningly to the disappointing results: “Since such things will now occur more frequently, every one who does such a thing ought to learn from this that the quantity of explosives should always be too much rather than too little.”¹⁵ At one point, the police suspected August Reinsdorf, one of the early German anarchist terrorists active all over Germany and already accused of masterminding the failed dynamite attack on the Kaiser during the opening of

the Niederwald Monument in September 1883 (he was later convicted and executed).¹⁶ In fact, Most himself would later, erroneously, designate Reinsdorf as the perpetrator.¹⁷

Evidence from city and police records and from anarchists themselves point to a different author: Joseph Richetzky, a Bohemian tailor who had become an emissary of the London clubs. The anarchist Wilhelm Gebhardt identified Richetzky as the perpetrator in 1890 as part of statements he made regarding his activities (the historian of the Frankfurt labor movement Volker Eichler believes these statements to be authentic).¹⁸ Victor Dave also mentions Richetzky as the bomber in a conversation with Max Nettlau.¹⁹ Immediately after the bombing, Richetzky traveled to Basel, then Paris, and then under the alias Jäger made his way to London. To avoid an extradition, he emigrated to New York in the fall of 1884.

How exactly was Most involved? To begin, his paper admitted that “one of them” used explosives produced by Most’s circle. This circle, it should be noted, was transnational, meaning activists resided not only in New York, but could be recruited in London, Zürich, Brussels, Paris, or Chicago. There are of course the published articles throughout 1883 dealing with revolutionary warfare, “dynamite politics,” and applied chemistry.²⁰

We also know that Most procured funds for activists to perform “deeds,” even though most of these “want-to-be-heroes,” as historian Heiner Becker called them, simply took the money and vanished (Most complained about this in a letter to Dave).²¹ Furthermore, it is possible that the explosives or ingredients used in Frankfurt were shipped by Most. He writes about shipping materials in letters to Dave (in 1884, so after the Frankfurt attentat).²² When Richetzky arrives in New York, Most writes to Dave again saying that “Jäger has arrived the day before yesterday and has straightaway told me a lot, though not yet the right things, although he

expressed the desire to speak with me alone soon, which I take to mean that he'll open up completely.”²³

Eventually and tragically, on January 13, 1885, Dr. Rumpff was murdered in front of his house in Frankfurt by a conspiracy involving August Peschmann and Julius Lieske out of revenge for Rumpff's role in the 1880 dragnet operation and subsequent trial. Heiner Becker believes that Most, while praising the killing, had nothing to do with this assassination, but was informed beforehand by Peschmann and Dave.²⁴

If there are any connections with Haymarket we can note that both Most and Louis Lingg, the proven bomb maker, had befriended Reinsdorf. Most's articles and his manual on revolutionary warfare were read by comrades in London (presumably by Richetzky) and Chicago. Adolph Fischer, for example, admitted that he learned about blasting caps in Most's manual, which was eventually submitted as evidence by the prosecution.²⁵ Oil cans with fuses found underneath pavement in the aftermath of the Haymarket bombing were turned over to the police who determined that Most's manual was used to make them.²⁶ Paul Avrich points out that the tactics laid out during the Monday night meeting came straight out of the same handbook.²⁷ It is clear that Johann Most and his paper *Freiheit*, at least during the period 1882-1886, acted as resource and facilitator to various violent activities and conspiracies that Most and his kind saw as appropriate resistance. In this light, it is not surprising that Most was ready to assist August Spies in “helping” the Hocking Valley miners' strike where Spies, in addressing the miners, had been threatened by Pinkerton agents. In a letter from October 1884 (the famous Most Letter), Most assured Spies that he could send 20 to 25 pounds of “medicine.”²⁸ This was not bragging. A month earlier, Most secretly obtained a job in a chemical factory in Jersey City Heights and was successful in stealing what he called “finished commodities” (*fertige Waare*).²⁹

Another relevant insight is that among proponents of insurrectionary anarchism, the use of violence was justified in a variety of ways. Some restricted it to defensive resistance, others as a means for targeted attacks or revenge attacks (like the failed Hronek conspiracy to kill Judge Gary, Grinnell, and Bonfield), others justified it as both defensive and offensive with the added prospect of sparking a wider revolution. During the Haymarket trial, the incriminating testimony of Gottfried Waller suggested just such a trigger scheme planned for the right place at the right time. This type of reasoning and planning was not unusual in revolutionary circles during the 1880s. Johann Most thought in exactly those terms. In a letter to Dave from January 1885, seven months into the Hocking Valley strike, he expressed frustration over the dismal prospect for revolution in Europe but was confident “that in America things are boiling and fermenting among the workers too [...] that here in America there is still a primeval force present that can be brought to explosion, that can shatter to pieces an old, rotten society [...] The Hocking Valley [...] is right now providing some beautiful outpost skirmishes [*Vorpostengefichte*].”³⁰

Given Most’s repeated call for armed struggle and the use of dynamite it was only natural for Most to assume that the bomb at Haymarket was thrown by someone in the movement.³¹ Like William Holmes, he believed that the act was “legally justified and militarily advantageous” since the hurler acted out of self-defense.³² Most barely escaped being tried with the Haymarket defendants. He had already been charged, then arrested and sentenced in New York for an incendiary speech he made in April 1886. Most believed to the very end that the Haymarket anarchists would be spared the death penalty, and when it happened it caused him to change his views on violent deeds as a revolutionary tactic.

¹ Records of the event and subsequent police investigation are located at the Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv (Wiesbaden). Abt. 405: Preussisches Regierungspräsidium Wiesbaden. Nr. 355: Dynamitattentat (1883-87); Explosion im Polizeidienstgebäude zu Frankfurt (mit Voruntersuchungen gegen Anarchisten). This collection comprises 106 pages (thanks to Dr. Rouven Pons of the Staatsarchiv for providing this information).

² Tom Goyens. *Beer and Revolution: The German Anarchist Movement in New York City, 1880-1914* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007). See also Bruce Nelson. *Beyond the Martyrs: A Social History of Chicago's Anarchists, 1870-1900* (Rutgers University Press, 1988).

³ Most was sitting out a prison sentence in Berlin when this massive crackdown was underway. He had earlier lost his seat in parliament. Most's own paper, *Berliner Freie Presse*, was suppressed several days after the law passed, and a month after that his six month-old daughter Melita died. See Frederic Trautmann. *The Voice of Terror: A Biography of Johann Most* (Westport, CT & London: Greenwood Press, 1980), p. 248. On Melita, see *Acta des Königlichen Polizei-Präsidii zu Berlin betreffend den Johann Most. 1874-80*. A. Br; Pr. 030, No. 11724. Landesarchiv Berlin, p. 2.

⁴ This large collection of police reports is now located at the Landesarchiv Berlin under *Acta des Königlichen Polizei-Präsidii zu Berlin* (A. Br; Pr. 030). On police spies see Andrew R. Carlson. *Anarchism in Germany I: The Early Movement* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1972), pp. 205-247; His-Huey Liang. *The Rise of Modern Police and the European State System from Metternich to the Second World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 135-137. See also the account by police spy [Rudolf Emil Martin.] *Der Anarchismus und seine Träger* (Berlin, 1887). On the London agent, see for example, agent's report dated July 25, 1879 in: *Acta des Königlichen Polizei-Präsidii zu Berlin betreffend den Johann Most. 1874-80*. A. Br; Pr. 030, No. 11724. Landesarchiv Berlin, p. 26. Known police spies operating in London included Oskar Neumann and Rudolf Emil Martin.

⁵ Volker Eichler. *Sozialistische Arbeiterbewegung in Frankfurt am Main 1878-1895* (Frankfurt a.M., 1983), p. 47.

⁶ Eichler, p. 65, 66. Twenty copies of *Freiheit* were typically sent from London to individual subscribers and to taverns like Prinz's where many could read it and distribute further.

⁷ Carlson, p. 223.

⁸ Eichler, p. 67. Perhaps it is from Braun that Most got the idea of taking a job at a chemical factory in 1884.

⁹ Police found press plates and type for the printing of pamphlets in Breuder's attic. Eichler, p. 70.

¹⁰ One of the arrested was Belgian anarchist Victor Dave who had been sent from London to organize more cells. He was arrested on December 8, 1880 in Augsburg where he stayed with Most's father. See Eichler, p. 70-71.

¹¹ Quoted in Eichler, p. 108.

¹² Quoted in Eichler, p. 108. The notice appeared in *Freiheit*, Nr. 44, 31 October 1883.

¹³ See the account of state attorney Eduard Müller. *Bericht über die Untersuchung betreffend die anarchistischen Umtriebe in der Schweiz an den hohen Bundesrath der schweiz. Eidgenossenschaft* (Bern: K.J. Wyss, 1885), p. 58.

¹⁴ Quoted in Eichler, p. 108.

¹⁵ Secret police report of 4 March 1884, quoted in Reinhard Höhn. *Die Vaterlandslosen Gesellen. Der Sozialismus im Lichte der Geheimberichte der preussischen Polizei (1878-1914)*, Bd. 1 (1878-1890) (Köln-Opladen, 1964), p. 201.

¹⁶ According to historian Heiner Becker, the police knew the suspect's name started with the letter R, and so at first they focused on Reinsdorf, later on Richetzky. See Heiner Becker. "Johann Most." In: *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*. Vol. 41, no. 1-2, (Mar 2005): p. 52, note 154.

¹⁷ In his pamphlet *August Reinsdorf und die Propaganda der That* (New York, 1885; Frankfurt: Verlag Edition, 2002), II, p. 58.

¹⁸ Eichler, p. 107 note 122.

¹⁹ Eichler, p. 109, note 142.

²⁰ See *Freiheit*, 20 January 1883; 14 April 1883; 5 May 1883; 12 May 1883; 30 June 1883; 24 November 1883.

²¹ While there are no letters from 1883, Most in a letter tells Dave he sent \$40 to an unknown person. See Johann Most to Victor Dave, 28 October 1884. Most und Neve. Briefe deutscher Anarchisten 1884-1887. Aus Victor Dave's Nachlass. Herausgegeben von Max Nettlau. International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam. See Heiner Becker. "Johann Most," p. 52. For Most's complaint to Dave, see letter from 19 November 1884. IISG.

²² Johann Most to Victor Dave, 19 September 1884 & 2 October 1884. Most und Neve. Briefe deutscher Anarchisten 1884-1887. Aus Victor Dave's Nachlass. IISG.

²³ Johann Most to Victor Dave, 15 November 1884. Most und Neve. Briefe deutscher Anarchisten 1884-1887. Aus Victor Dave's Nachlass. IISG. Richetzky would remain in New York until 1886 when he moved to Cleveland and later to San Francisco. See Eichler, p. 110, note 144.

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- ²⁴ Becker. "Johann Most," p. 52-3, note 155 & 156. See also *Freiheit*, 24 January, 1885.
- ²⁵ Timothy Messer-Kruse. *The Trial of the Haymarket Anarchists: Terrorism and Justice in the Gilded Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 15.
- ²⁶ Messer-Kruse. *The Trial*, p. 24.
- ²⁷ Paul Avrich. *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 191.
- ²⁸ Messer-Kruse. *The Trial*, p. 96.
- ²⁹ Johann Most to Victor Dave, 19 September 1884. Most und Neve. Briefe deutscher Anarchisten 1884-1887. Aus Victor Dave's Nachlass. IISG. Most's move to Jersey City was not so secret, even the Berlin political police knew about it and mentioned it in their secret report of 24 July 1886. See Höhn. *Die Vaterlandslosen Gesellen*, p. 274.
- ³⁰ Johann Most to Victor Dave, 13 January 1885. Most und Neve. Briefe deutscher Anarchisten 1884-1887. Aus Victor Dave's Nachlass. IISG.
- ³¹ *Freiheit*, May 8, 1886.
- ³² Quoted in Henry David. *The History of the Haymarket Affair* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1936), p. 522.