



Kenyon Zimmer. *Immigrants against the State: Yiddish and Italian Anarchism in America.* Working Class in American History Series. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015. x + 300 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-03938-6.



Reviewed by Daniel Soyer

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Commissioned by Matthew A. Kraus (University of Cincinnati)

In *Immigrants against the State*, Kenyon Zimmer provides a detailed history of the anarchist movement among immigrant Jews and Italians in America between the 1880s and 1930s. Focusing on Jewish New York City, Italian Patterson, New Jersey, and ethnically mixed San Francisco, California, Zimmer seeks to rescue anarchism from historical marginality by showing it to be a major force not only in the left but also in the ethnic communities under study. He argues specifically that the movement was “not simply transplanted from Europe” but that immigrant workers developed anarchist sympathies based on their experiences in the shops and slums of America; that immigrants “did not inevitably” go through a process of moderation and Americanization; and that the collapse of the movement ultimately came about because of the end of mass immigration, and the demoralizing debacle of the Spanish Civil War (p. 13). Prodigious research in six languages allows Zimmer to understand the inner world of the radicals. *Immigrants against the State* is, moreover, a model of transnational histo-

ry: although the story is centered in the United States, it includes side trips to Russia, Italy, England, Spain, and Mexico. This is likely to be an essential work on immigrant anarchism for years to come.

Zimmer frames his discussion of the Jewish movement with the concept of Yidishkayt as a secular Jewish ethnic identity based in the Yiddish language and rejecting narrow ethnocentrism. In the case of the Jewish anarchists, irreligion and hostility to traditional Judaism were not simply incidental; they were central parts of their cause, a stance that Zimmer thinks may have gained the anarchists more support than it cost as evidenced by the substantial crowds at such events as Yom Kippur balls. Despite their ideological commitment to “rooted cosmopolitanism,” the Jewish anarchists turn out to have been more isolated than their Italian comrades, an isolation Zimmer attributes to the generally “insular nature of New York’s Jewish community” (pp. 16, 210). Zimmer thus takes issue with most recent scholarship, which stresses the permeability of borders and

mutual influences between Jewish immigrant culture and those of neighboring ethnic groups and “mainstream” America. Ironically, it may be that the anarchists were more insular than other sectors of the community.

Similarly, Zimmer writes, anarchism constituted a “way of life” in Patterson that encompassed a version of Italianità that sought to overcome the provincial loyalties of many Italian immigrants without putting admiration for the nation-state in their place (p. 50). Italian anarchists also put opposition to religion at the center of their alternative version of Italian culture. This outlook was anything but marginal: anarchists dominated local lodges of the Sons of Italy, the largest Italian American fraternal order, and played a leading role in the famous 1912 Patterson silk strike.

In San Francisco, Italians formed the main base for the movement, but forged alliances especially with Spanish- and French-speaking comrades to form a “Latin” movement that transcended narrow ethnic lines. The city’s movement also included Chinese, Japanese, and Indian immigrant anarchists, as well as Russians and Jews. In San Francisco, as elsewhere, the anarchists did not always live up to their declared belief in complete gender equality, especially as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) extolled universal working-class manhood as a substitute for nation.

Anarchism was a transnational movement. Not surprisingly, Americans raised money for comrades in Russia and Italy. But in some especially dramatic moments, American anarchists also crossed borders (which, in any case, they did not recognize) to participate in revolutions elsewhere. Thus, some took part in a brief anarchist insurgency during the Mexican Revolution, and Jewish and Russian anarchists returned to Russia to contribute to the revolution there. The Spanish Civil War was a defining moment. By the mid-1930s, Spain was the only place where anarchism still constituted a true mass movement, and

anarchists abroad watched with excitement as a libertarian social revolution seemed to unfold. A number went to help. But, of course, the Spanish Revolution was crushed not only by Franco’s fascists but, as the anarchist saw it, by Stalinist perfidy as well.

Spain was just one of many blows that sapped the vitality of American anarchism. Repression in the United States during the Red Scare of 1919-21 died down. But Soviet repression intensified; an estimated 90 percent of anarchist returnees died at the hands of the Soviet state. In response, most anarchists became bitterly anti-communist, often compromising their ideals to make alliances with similarly anti-communist social democrats in the labor movement. The increasing popularity of fascism marginalized the anarchists among Italian Americans. During the Depression, anarchists had a hard time responding to popular state programs to aid the working class instituted by the New Deal. World War II delivered the final blow, as anarchists struggled to formulate an adequate response to Hitlerism.

In the absence of a national organization or election returns, Zimmer bases much of his assessment of anarchist strength on an analysis of the circulation of the movement’s press. He estimates that the total circulation of the anarchist press peaked at about 110,000 circa 1910. It is hard to argue from this that anarchism had even close to the influence of socialism, its chief rival on the left, when the largest single socialist publication, the *Appeal to Reason*, had a circulation of half a million at the time. Likewise, by 1910, the circulation of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, the largest American socialist daily, equaled that of all anarchist publications combined.

Zimmer is decidedly sympathetic to his subjects, though not uncritical. He shows that there was in fact a violent streak in certain corners of the movement, not to mention an often debilitating factionalism. In the end, however, he judges them more right than wrong, and more successful

than meets the eye. True, the immigrants' children, if not the immigrants themselves, did Americanize in such a way that led them away from revolutionary politics. But, as Zimmer shows, anarchist ideas had a surprisingly abiding influence on such important American cultural and political movements as the Beat poets and the New Left.

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