
Lessons from anarchy, Ybor and the original age of terror

BY GARY R. MORMINO
Special to the Times

Driven by a messianic faith and inspired by dreams of brotherhood, anarchists terrified the public with waves of violence, shocking the ruling classes and canonizing true believers who fulfilled “propaganda by deed.” It was the *other* age of terror, 1881-1919.

For four decades, acts of political violence gripped Europe and America. The assassination of Russian Czar Alexander II in 1881 ushered in this bloody epoch. In 1893, a Spanish anarchist threw two Orsini bombs

— the original IEDs, makeshift grenades that exploded on impact — into the Liceu Theater in Barcelona, killing 22 patrons.

A month later, an anarchist hurled a bomb into the French National Assembly. In 1894, an Italian anarchist stabbed the president of France to death, followed by the killings of Spanish Prime Minister Antonio Canovas del Castillo and King Umberto of Italy. In 1901, a Hungarian anarchist assassinated U.S. President William McKinley. King Carlos of Portugal and his son were shot to death in 1908.

Tampa might seem like an unlikely setting for such melodrama. But for decades, authorities waged a campaign to combat real and imagined threats by radicals in general, and Italian and Spanish anarchists in particular.

The roots of Tampa’s anarchist traditions can be traced to the 19th century homelands of Spanish and Italian immigrants. Small farmers and peasants emigrated from Asturias and Galicia, provinces in northern Spain, while desperate Italians fled southwestern Sicily. The lives of

» See YBCR, 5P

Spanish and Sicilian peasants and artisans worsened as a litany of problems aggravated peasants' lives: spiraling birth rates, corrupt landlords and clergy, and imperial misadventures.

In Spain and Sicily, anarchism possessed a passionate fascination with *los miserables*. The writings of a Russian anarchist offered hope. Mikhail Bakunin exalted the inherent good of humankind but condemned the inequality of modern life. He urged the masses to topple society's political, military and religious pillars. Once rid of the yoke of oppression, individuals would live among themselves in a voluntary and cooperative manner.

To the question, how shall individuals reconcile personal liberty with the modern nation-state, anarchists answered simply: Abolish the state.

But how do powerless people dislodge armies and police, bishops and mayors? Propaganda by deed. Of course, assassinations provoked brutal repression, which merely reinforced the need to abolish government. Many anarchists advocated education to pave a peaceful path to the stateless goal.

Bakunin's message electrified Spanish and Sicilian peasants. In a world long dominated by reactionary officials and the dreaded civil guard, Bakunin's appeal to direct action found a receptive audience among people who venerated the social bandit and the promise of freedom.

Marcelino García, a cigar maker in Ybor City, told the late Paul Avarich, the dean of anarchist writers, in 1971: "I was born in 1893 in San Martín in the Asturias region of northern Spain. I was born an anarchist. ... At 7 or 8 I already had an admiration for the anarchists. I saw in them men who were willing to fight for the poor."

Ybor City was a capitalist paradise. Founded in 1886 by Vicente Martínez Ybor, the community quickly became a profitable center for the production of hand-rolled cigars.

Immigrants, mostly single males, encountered a community afire with radical ideologies. Born in Sicily, Angelo Massari described his life's journey: "When in 1902 I landed in Tampa, I found myself in a world of radicals for which I was prepared. ... In those days, anarchists and socialists were many." Massari recalled joining radical societies that invited leading radicals to lecture in Ybor City.

One such invitee, Pedro Esteve, chose to remain. Born in Barcelona, Spain, he was a heroic figure in the Catalan anarchist movement. He married

Maria Roda, an Italian anarchist. One of Roda's classmates assassinated Sadi Carnot, the president of France.

Fully aware of the vulnerability of a one-industry town, Tampa's leaders resolved to rid the city of radicals. "Tampa can afford to lose cigarmakers," editorialized the *Tampa Tribune*, "Tampa cannot afford to lose cigar factories."

By 1895, Tampa counted 130 cigar factories, which accounted for the lion's share of the city's payroll. By 1910, nearly 10,000 first- and second-generation immigrants and children labored in Tampa cigar factories.

Ybor City was a hotbed of competing ideas. Socialists, communists and anarchists appropriated May 1 as International Workers' Day. The *Tribune* reacted to May Day and the flying of black flags: "Left to himself, the cigarmaker is a fairly good citizen. But unfortunately, there is another class ... this class of mischief-breeding, anarchist agitators." The paper also noted that Latins, "when subjected to the devilish influences of even one unprincipled socialist, communist or anarchist, are transformed into little less than madmen."

In 1910, a reporter covering a workers' gath-

ering observed, "It was a demonstration such as reared its head within the gates of Old Barcelona, that hot-bed of Latin civic disturbance." Vigilantes, assisted by Tampa police, hanged two Italians. A mob wrecked Pedro Esteve's print shop.

Little wonder that as the United States entered World War I, Americans were deeply concerned about their safety amid millions of immigrants. Peace brought little relief as Italian anarchists set off bombs on Wall Street and at the home of the U.S. attorney general.

Federal agents honeycombed Ybor City in search of traitors. Reports obtained at the Bureau of Investigation (a precursor to the FBI) documented the fears. Agent A.V. French wrote his superiors in Washington, "I can state that the Italian-Spanish colonies of West Tampa and Ybor City are the most advanced toward the 'Social Revolution.' I would say they have established here a Soviet on the small scale."

The practice of cigarmakers' hiring one of their own to read literature to workers had always served as a lightning rod. An agent warned that "every reader in the factories of Tampa was reading Bolsheviki literature." Another report warned that

anarchists in Tampa were plotting to kill the president of Mexico. Agents deported two Latins who had befriended the assassin of the Spanish prime minister.

Americans demanded change. Voters elected Warren G. Harding, who promised a "return to normalcy." Congress imposed draconian immigration restrictions, drastically limiting the number of new Italians and Spaniards, Slavs and Jews. In 1920, the U.S. Army transport *Buford*, nicknamed the "Red Ark," set sail for Bolshevik Russia, bound with 250 deported radicals.

Today, Tampa's anarchist heritage seems hard to imagine. A few clues document the lost heritage. Anarchist parents attached deep meanings to children's names. Leto High School in Tampa is named for Ateo Phillip Leto, an Italian principal. "Ateo" means atheist in Italian. I interviewed the son of Spanish anarchists whose name was Destruyen Iglesias (Destroy the church!).

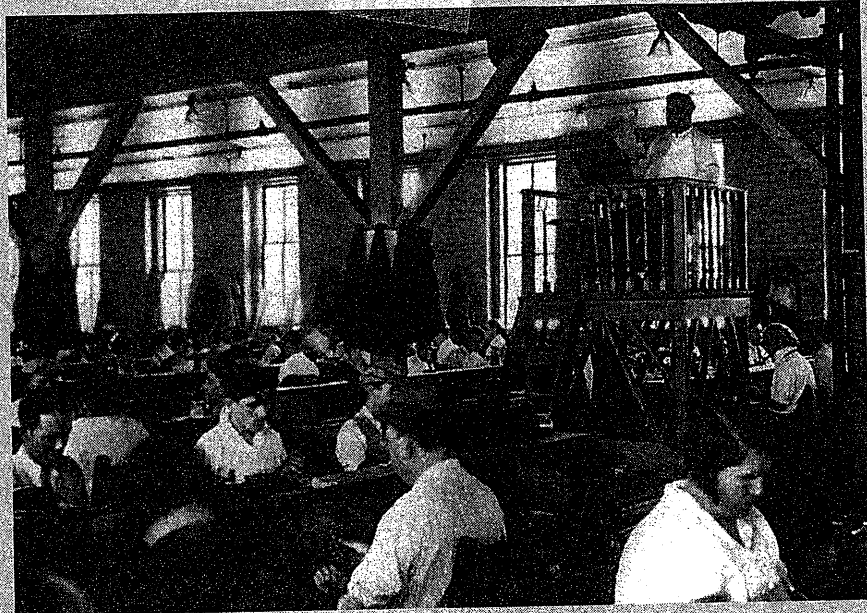
What happened to the movement? Decades of government reprisals and deportations took a toll. But the easy explanation is that capitalism, for all of its flaws, worked.

Consider Angelo Massari, the fiery Sicilian who landed in Tampa. Massari became an international banker! The successes of capitalism convinced most immigrants that while America may never become a workers' utopia, its factories, schools and liberties offered them a slice of the American dream. Anarchism was an ideology borne of Old World scarcity. Ybor City was rooted in New World abundance. In bursts of reform, the nation-state, the bane of anarchists, passed legislation that protected the worker and created greater equality.

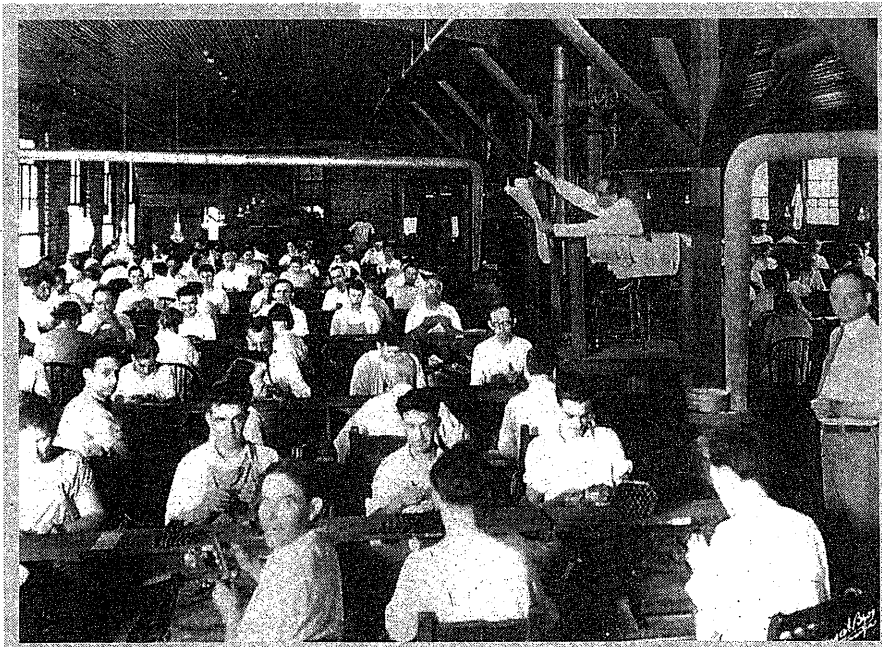
In 1987, George Pozzetta and I wrote *The Immigrant World of Ybor City*. I soon received a phone call asking about the book. The caller insisted I open the book to page 148. The offending sentence began, "Other anarchists, such as Salvatore Lodato..." Salvatore's son bellowed, "My father was not an anarchist." His voice dropped, "And I'm coming to the university to kick your a - -!"

Upon inflicting a verbal mauling, Mr. Lodato invited me to meet his brothers over lunch. Several months later, I received a package in the mail. The proud sons had written a biography of their father, titled, "Salvatore Lodato: An Anarchist." Salvatore Lodato had lived honorably as a peaceful anarchist.

Gary R. Mormino is scholar in residence at the Florida Humanities Council and recipient of the 2015 Florida Lifetime Achievement award in writing. He wrote this exclusively for the Tampa Bay Times.



A lector reads to cigar workers in Tampa, probably in the 1920s. The philosophies of workers from anarchist hotbeds in Sicily and northern Spain clashed with the free-market views of the capitalists who owned the factories.



Anarchists were gone by the time this photo was taken in 1930. But earlier in Ybor City's history, an agent warned that "every reader (hired by workers) in the factories of Tampa was reading Bolsheviki literature" to them as they toiled.