

The 'Malatesta Affair' and the Siege of Sidney Street

History & Policy Event

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Errico Malatesta



Malatesta

- Why should you be interested?
- The context – historical interest since 9/11.
- David C. Rapoport: The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism: Anarchist, Anti-Colonial Nationalist, 1968ers, Radical Political Islamism
- The UK/London context: 19th Century and on:
- Liberalism, cosmopolitanism and the older trans-ideological 'Free-Born Englishman (sic)' or British liberties: from Burke to Paine or from Michael Foot to David Davis.

Malatesta

- 1848 and all that: Neither revolution nor reaction (Metternich and Garibaldi). Even Switzerland expels anarchists in the 1890s. Tortured Spanish anarchists ‘dumped’ in London.
- British line and image: Common Law protects liberties: no thought crimes (except criminal libel and incitement to violence and homicide: see Most affair in 1882).

Malatesta

- London: Before 1914 –capital of the capitalist world: cosmopolitan capital of exiled global anarchism (Soho and Fitzrovia).
- Parallels to late twentieth century London and Islamism: 1990 so-called ‘Londonistan’ (French) and 1890s London (French: the Mecca of anarchism). Walsall and Greenwich Affairs:
- French terrorists and Angiolillo.

Malatesta

- Anarchism, UK and other powers before 1914.
- UK failure to support the proposals at 1898 Rome conference. But UK does keep tabs on Malatesta's movements in and out of the UK for the Italians in the 1890s.
- Suspicions of supra-governmental solutions.
- Tensions with foreign undercover agents in the UK/London.
- The role of the Okhrana, and Italian, German or French agents: queering the pitch, 'Continental' incompetence etc. Agents provocateurs stimulate incidents: the Rubino Affair:1902.
- But evidence of British officials working (moon-lighting) for the Italians and the Russians etc (Butterworth, 2010 and Di Paola, 2013).

Malatesta

- Errico Malatesta: 1853-1932 (Middle class 'narodnik' (not an aristocrat), medical student dropout from University Naples – learns trade.
- Predominant figure in Italian anarchism: anarcho-communist organisational anarchism: a sort of libertarian socialism. Role in social unrest in Italy – 1890s, 1914 and 1919-1920.
- Against mass terror and 'expropriations' but more ambiguous in terms of political assassination: Umberto and Mussolini.

Malatesta

- Malatesta in London: 1882-1883, 1889-1897, 1900-1913 and 1914-1919.
- Lives in Islington at time of events- long-term resident. Electrical and gas fitting shop.
- Hero of two worlds- like Mazzini or Garibaldi.
- The British sympathy for the Risorgimento (particularly Liberals and socialists and the labour movement). These cultural tropes and Malatesta: see shop (deli) of friend in Soho- *Re Bomba*

Malatesta

- Malatesta and the 'Siege of Sidney Street'
- One of the gang- Mourontzeff met Rudolf Rocker in the Jewish Anarchist Jubilee Club and directed to Malatesta's Duncan Street workshop to buy a 40 foot cylinder of oxygen found at the scene of the crime (Malatesta's business card found there). Malatesta paid one pound on account and awaiting the remaining four pounds.
- Malatesta questioned at Whitechapel police station.
- Denied any involvement and denounces the actions of the Latvians.
- Police release him and Malatesta says police treated him decently.

Malatesta

- From the Siege of Sidney Street to the Malatesta affair.
- Italian war in Libya 1911- opens up chain events to 1914.
- British Liberals (W. T. Stead) and Italian exiles denounce invasion and the 'war crimes' the Italians carry out. Malatesta knows the Radical Liberals vs. 'Cosmopolitan Club' of Tom Mann.

Malatesta

- Fellow Italian anarchist Ennio Bellelli (actual secret agent 'Virgilio' to Prime Minister Giolitti: bypassing Italian London embassy (see other agent in Paris 'Dante'): supports the invasion.
- Bellelli (in private) denounces Malatesta and indeed Stead (who drowns in the Titanic disaster) as Turkish spies.
- Malatesta release public Italian language document ('Alla Colonia Italiani di Londra, 22 April 1912) announcing that Bellelli is an Italian agent. Italian anarchist 'counter-espionage' has been shown to be correct.

Malatesta

- Bellelli brings criminal libel action against Malatesta. Found guilty: Judge Darling orders Malatesta be sent to Wormwood Scrubs prison for 3 months and to be deported to Italy on completion of his sentence.
- Testimony at trial by inspectors from Scotland Yard: Malatesta is a notorious anarchist and the circumstantial evidence from Sidney Street rehashed. But in the inquest following Sidney Street the CID had said he had lived a blameless life in London (the famous 'unwritten agreement').
- The trial is a test case of the 1905 Aliens' Act: the deportation of an undesirable alien on the strength (among other things) of a judge's recommendation.

Malatesta

- The Campaign to quash the deportation order.
- Overlapping networks of exiles, anarchists, Islingtonians, the British left from syndicalists to Labour Party (Keir Hardie, George Lansbury and Ramsay MacDonald), newspapers – Labour, Left, liberal Intellectuals BUT also *The Times* etc.
- Mass demonstrations, questions in Parliament and private lobbying: Prince Kropotkin- the acceptable face of anarchism - Royal Geographical Society etc.

Malatesta

- The argument: The deportation was based on thought crimes: Judge Darling is a High Tory.
- The febrile context: 'The Strange Death of Liberal England': syndicalism, Ireland and the suffragettes.
- The themes of the papers: Against British traditions- The British do not do political trials; the memory of the Risorgimento; 'Free-Born Englishman' etc.

Malatesta

- Most revealing in the local Islingtonian newspaper: Conservative, Fair Trade Unionist, *Islington Daily Gazette and North London Tribune*: Defended his right to remain in his local abode. It was merely a case of a 'free-born Englishman' to whom 'the sense of fair-play is especially clear'.

'Are we to tolerate in our country the methods of policemanism that are prevalent in the most backward of Continental countries such as Russia! Are we going to allow Judges to call upon detectives to give their opinions of a man's political views? Are we going to permit exceptional punishment to be visited upon a man because a policeman does not think as his victim thinks?'

Malatesta

- Malatesta saved from deportation by a potent combination of political argument, demonstrations and the 'old boys' network.
- Kropotkin to John Burns in Cabinet, former New Unionist firebrand of the 1880s/1890s, then President of the Board of Trade. Kropotkin asked Burns to make representations to the Home Secretary and the order was quashed.
- Apparently the following exchange happened:

Malatesta

- The 'Anarchist Prince':
'reminded Burns of his own past when he led a procession of striking dockers through the London streets. Burns remarked that he had long seen the stupidity of such acts, and then Kropotkin heatedly answered that it was a good thing that there were still people willing to indulge in 'stupidities' for the good of their fellows, though by such means one could not grasp at a ministerial chair. Burns then laughed and Malatesta finally escaped deportation' (Woodcock and Avakumović, 1950).