



Granny Made Me an Anarchist: General Franco, The Angry Brigade and Me

Stuart Christie

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In 1964, a fresh-faced, eighteen-year-old Glaswegian named Stuart Christie became the most famous anarchist in Britain. He was arrested delivering dynamite to Madrid to be used in the assassination of Spanish dictator General Franco. After serving three of his twenty-year sentence, he was released, due to international pressure from supporters like Bertrand Russell and Jean Paul Sartre. Eight years later, he was arrested again in England on suspicion of membership in the Angry Brigade-an armed group hell-bent on overthrowing the government-but was this time acquitted. Christie's warm and witty memoir, from the tough streets of post-World War II Glasgow to the heady ideals of the Generation of '68, reads like a cloak-and-dagger political thriller.

Granny Made Me an Anarchist chronicles clandestine political maneuverings, life behind bars, and flirtations with radical youth who were convinced the government could be toppled and their country made anew. Avoiding the self-centered trappings of many 1960s memoirs, Christie's lamentations shine light into the darkness and illuminate the human soul.

Granny Made Me an Anarchist: General Franco, The Angry Brigade and Me Details

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James says

Book Review: "Granny Made Me An Anarchist: General Franco, The Angry Brigade And Me"

by Stuart Christie

Review by James Generic

Edited by Michelle Woods and Yoni Kroll

Some people are just born as natural rebels. Stuart Christie is such a person. He was born in 1946 in working-class Glasgow, Scotland, into a world split in two by the ever-present sectarian rift between the Catholics and Protestants. Christie was a member of the Orange Order growing up, an anti-Catholic Protestant fraternal organization. When he came of age, however, he went through a metamorphosis of left-wing thinking. After meeting with members of the Coal Miners' Union, Christie became an anarchist. He was 16. From that point on, his life would revolve around the ideals of anarchism, which stands for social justice, community autonomy, and individual liberty.

Soon after, Christie became involved with the anti-nuke movement in Scotland, where he saw all the different varieties of the radical movement, from pacifist liberals to labor party hacks to Trotskyites to the anarchists. He quickly became impatient with the nonviolent protest marches, which were seemingly ignored, and longs to do more. When talking to older Anarchists, he learns of the fight in Spain a mere twenty-five years before, where the ideas of Anarchism nearly achieved success in the farms and factories of Catalonia in Eastern Spain. If it hadn't been for the betrayal by the Stalinist forces, the anarchists would of beat Franco's fascists and prevented the dictator from taking power. This recent history had a huge affect on the young Christie and he decided to attempt to kill Franco, under the assumption that the end of Franco would mean the end of his regime.

At only 18 years in 1964, he links up with a Spanish Anarchist group and makes his way to Spain through France. Upon entering Franco's Madrid, he is almost immediately arrested by Brigada Politico Social (BPS), the Spanish secret police, who were supplied information on his arrival by the British Scotland Yard. That the British secret service would collaborate with the fascists amazed Christie. During the interrogation and beatings, his explosives are quickly discovered by the police, and the only thing that saves him and the Spanish anarchists arrested with him from a quick execution is his foreign citizenship, since Spain at the time was trying to soften it's image to attract tourism and foreign money and didn't want to scare either away by executing foreigners or those involved with them. Christie enters Spanish prison on a thirty year prison term, and quickly meets the "politicos" or political prisoners, which are a variety of trade unionists, anarchists, socialists, communists, and any other dissenter in Franco's Spain. Later in his life in British prisons, Christie realized that the liberal democracy of Britain's jails were much worse than the jails of Franco's fascist Spain, in brutality, isolation, food, and exercise, amongst other things. Quickly, he becomes the center of an international campaign to free him by radicals to free him, though he is ignored by Amnesty International for accepting violence and because he admits guilt.

Eventually after three years in a Spanish prison in 1967, Christie is freed when his grandmother writes to Franco and Franco decides to score points in order to attract more British and other European tourists to Spain by showing mercy. When he returns to Scotland, dogged by the press, he noticed that Britain has changed a lot during his years in jail, as rebellion and disobedience and rock music became the new norm for the Youths of England and the rest of the West, specifically protesting the US war in Vietnam, nuclear weapons, and a host of other actions attacking the established order of thing. Christie did his best to fit back into the world, moving to London and becoming an electrician for a trade. He joined Albert Meltzer's Wooden Shoe Bookshop on Compton Street, and restarted the Anarchist Black Cross which fights for political prisoners, and co-founded the long-running "Black Flag" magazine with Meltzer, an anarchist investigative

and analytical magazine, and helped raise money for the "First of May Group", a Spanish-anarchist resistance group to Franco's regime. However, these activities also brought him near constant police harassment, surveillance, and media attention calling for his imprisonment.

In 1970, as the war in Vietnam roared on and the limits of pacifism and peaceful demonstrations became apparent, the author goes on to tell us that many left-wing youths involved started to turn to more militant and violent actions, like the Weathermen in the US, the Red Brigades in Italy, the Red Army Faction in Germany, and in the UK the Angry Brigade. These groups, with varying levels of success, took the guerilla warfare aspects of Mao Zedong and Che Guevera to "bring the war home", in actions such as bombing campaigns, kidnappings, propaganda deeds, and acts of sabotage. The Angry Brigade, a group influenced by anarcho-syndicalists and situationist politics but never outward about their politics, claimed responsibility for 25 bombings in the UK from 1970 to 1972, targeting at government offices, banks, and the homes of conservative politicians, though only targeting property and not killing anyone (unlike later bombings done by IRA, PLO, and Basque groups), as well as releasing political statements explaining their actions. Christie, though sympathetic to the Angry Brigade, has nothing to do with their activities and stays away from any extra-legal activities. This does not stop Scotland Yard from trying to scape-goat him as a well-known Anarchist as a member of the Angry Brigade.

In 1972, Christie was arrested on "conspiracy to cause explosions" from planted evidence by the British "bomb squad" which had been organized to catch the Angry Brigade. He was arrested along with a dozen other British radicals. After a very long trial, he is found not guilty of all charges and the others only guilty of conspiracy. Christie notes that one of the keys to their victory is that in the trial, they made sure that the jury was as working class as possible. Why? Because during the course of the trial, the defense proved that the defendants were simply normal working class people, with regular worries and jobs, with different political beliefs who were being persecuted, to the point of even planting evidence, by the Crown as scapegoats. After the trial, Christie also notes that the British prosecution of political trials from then on would be held outside of the cities and in middle-class dominated areas, similar to how in the US, many trials against Blacks are stacked with White jurists.

Stuart Christie helped run Cienfuegos Press, a radical publisher which he founded, from 1974 until 1982, and continues to be active in anarchist publishing projects in the UK. "Granny Made Me An Anarchist" is a really humorous book, and a thing I really enjoyed was that he never assumed that you knew the terms he was talking about, and therefore inserts many excerpts throughout the book explaining terms, periods, groups, and historical events, like Anarchism, The First of May Group, Francisco Franco, the Angry Brigades, etc. He examines his past with a critical eye but never apologizes for anything he's done, since he has nothing to be ashamed of and remains true to the values and actions of his youth (though he hasn't tried to blow up anymore dictators since then.) He's also very funny and doesn't take himself so seriously at any point, a thing you can tell that he came from humble beginnings and never really got away his raising by his Granny and Mum, a truly good person he is. This book is a great find for anyone who has trouble keeping idealistic in troubling times.

Ipswichblade says

Brilliant book with a tough subject made very easy to read. Despite having read a lot about the sixties and seventies Stuart Christie was a name I was unfamiliar with. How refreshing to see someone stick to their principles throughout when it would have easier to denounce them

karly says

this is basically an autobiography written by stuart christie, a long time UK anarchist and one of the founders of the Anarchist Black Cross, about his youth and time in franco's prisons. It also covers the famous angry brigade trial in which christie was acquitted. it has an interesting section in which he talks about when he left the uk to go to spain the "culutral revolution" of the sixties hadn't happened yet and when he came back he was kind of blown away but at the same time unimpressed with the overall scene. it gave me a little bit better of an idea or words to use with how i relate to the wider punk scene here.

Roger Cottrell says

I loved this memoir of the period which was given me by the author after he read my crime retrospective, HOLLYWOOD BOWL, in which the Angry Brigade feature as fictional characters. I've since been comissioned by Stuart to write the screen adaptation of the book which I have done. Magnificent and highly readable.

Domhnall says

An enthralling book on many levels, not least telling a great yarn at a decent pace. The book opens with an 18 year old anarchist on trial in Franco's Spain for his part in a plot to murder Franco, with the possibility of execution by macabre methods. It closes (more or less) with an account of his later trial in the UK on the trumped up charge of being a leader of the Angry Brigade, a label for violent anarchists responsible for attacks on property in the early Seventies.

In describing the author's participation in the politics of left wing protest during the Sixties and early Seventies, the book exposes the extent and nature of state sponsored violence against British citizens in defence of the establishment, including a discussion of conspiracies against the elected Labour government of Harold Wilson which have since been fully proven, but also of the role of the same government in undermining democratic protest and betraying the interests of the working class movement of the time. Christie's book is actually very measured in the claims it makes, providing full supporting evidence. He dwells also on the bizarre reality that for more than three decades after the end of World War II, Franco's brutal fascist regime was actively supported by the USA, the police and security services in countries like Italy and France remained in the hands of unreconstructed fascists and racists, while Nazi SS officers remained in gainful employment providing military and subversive services to the western democracies in a continuing war against democratic left wing movements in Europe, Latin America and the African colonies.

In its explanation of anarchism (there is a clear definition and explanation, notably on page 89, which I will not type out here) the book makes significant references to Max Stirner, a philosopher whose book "The Ego and His Own" made a big impression on me in my early twenties. It is the first time I have seen Stirner employed in any context to support an argument. I have often contrasted his brilliant arguments to the pale and insipid "egoism" of the idiot Ayn Rand and I would have liked a discussion of the important distinctions between Anarchism - which is very firmly a socialist and left wing philosophy - and the right wing "libertarianism" so popular in the USA.

Some quotes:

"The libertarian view of democracy, however, depended on the individual participation of each and every citizen in the decision making process. The greatest obstacle to be overcome in all social and political relationships... was not the corrupting or arbitrary nature of power but the human proclivity to obedience and deference. Each of us needed to be an activist, constantly, in every decision we took. The tension was not between anarchism and democracy, or even capitalism or communism, but between anarchism and complacency." [p84]

"...anarchism was a way of life rather than an abstract view of a remote future. It was not a theory, a philosophy, a 'programme for life', nor yet a description of how individuals and society should one day be, but a whole new way of looking at the world we were in - a way of assessing and acting upon values, principles, moralities, belief systems, ideologies and social relationships. It was a glimpse of perfection, something against which I could measure myself and my actions right now." [p84]

"The central justification of violence is self defence and righting great wrongs which have no other redress. It is always a last resort and has no part in promoting Anarchism. Ideas can only be advanced through argument, debate and persuasion. In fact, one of the main planks of Anarchism is the removal of coercion and violence from all human relations. How you get change is by pushing at the boundaries with whatever methods are available to ameliorate things - writing to your MP, demonstrations, petitions, pickets, civil disobedience and occupations. Violence can only come into the equation when people reach the limits beyond which the powers-that-be will permit no more reform. It is then up to each individual whether or not they should turn back or go beyond those limits. But, to paraphrase Mrs Beaton and Noam Chomsky, you first have to reach those limits." [p108]

In prison, both in Spain and the UK, Christie spent time with characters responsible for some vile crimes, some of whom he describes in his book. He concluded: *"Before I went to prison my world view was black and white, a moral chessboard on which everyone was either a goody or a baddy. But the ambiguities in people I came across in prison made me uneasy and I began to question my assumptions about the nature of good and evil. I came to recognise that apparently kind people sometimes had a duplicitous side, while those with a reputation for cruelty sometimes showed themselves capable of great selflessness and generosity of spirit. ... I was brought face to face with what Hannah Arendt termed 'the banality of evil'. As far as I could tell, there was no psychological or sociological equation between intelligence and bravery, conviction and courage, ideology and humanity or class and generosity of spirit. .. The fact I met very few people who could honestly be called 'evil' made me more inclined to look for the reason they had committed evil acts. I became less judgemental of individuals and more committed to oppose a form of society that inclined individuals to commit crimes against each other." [pp201,202]*

This book is a great read and a fine piece of social history, documenting an important strand of our social history that remains relevant and in need of explanation today. It is not necessary to agree with its point of view but it is necessary to acknowledge the evidence that our western democracies are violent and dangerous places, in which the alternative to being active citizens is to be complicit in our own oppression. I do not know that anarchism is the only alternative to complacency but I do agree that we each have a duty to ourselves to find an active alternative.

Allan says

Maybe I am just a sucker for stories from radicals, but this was really enjoyable. a radical life well lived

through fascinating periods. Stuart Christie weaves a good tale of inspiring antics and struggle.

Nigeyb says

An autobiography of Stuart Christie. I'd not heard of him until reading this book.

His main claim to fame is being charged with attempting to assassinate General Franco in 1964 when he was still only 18. Far from his home in Glasgow and unable to speak Spanish he was arrested meeting his Spanish contact. The worst part of the charge was that it was completely true.

In 1971 he was arrested again, this time in Britain, suspected of being a member of the Angry Brigade.

The book works on so many levels. It's an insightful social history that touches on changes in Europe - and especially Britain - in the 50s, 60s & 70s. It provides a great overview of radical politics during the same period. It's a great exploration of the legacy of the Spanish Civil War and the way the ideas endured beyond the 1930s. The early 70s are evoked especially well - the radical politics, an establishment on the run and the bent coppers. It's also the story of an exceptional man - basically an ordinary working class bloke who happened to hold very strong political convictions and wanted to change society. That said he is very thoughtful and realistic about his ideals and what he managed to achieve. The book is fascinating, Stuart's personal story is rivetting and his ideas are still completely valid and contemporary. Alas my perception is that less people are prepared to engage with and discuss these ideas. I find it amazing that 35 years ago a sizeable proportion of the UK population believed that society could be - and was about to be - changed for the better. It didn't happen and I'm not sure it'll ever happen again.

Fascinating and inspiring.

Trawets says

Stuart Christie was eighteen years old when a Spanish court sentenced him to twenty years for his part in an assassination attempt on General Franco.

In this book Christie tells what led him to that court, his experiences during his three years incarceration and his later trial in England charged and found not guilty of conspiracy in the Angry Brigade bombing campaign of the early 1970's.

In some ways an interesting and at times exciting book, however Stuart Christie, tells us far more about the Anarchist cause and its adherents than I really wanted to know.

Gary says

The story of a young Scot who wishes to do something to settle Franco's hash. Franco, after all, was the last of the Axis fascist dictators who somehow survived into the 1960s. I did feel a bit uneasy about Stuart's lying to the Spanish authorities once he was captured, but who wouldn't do this in order to save themselves from the garrote or 20 years in a fascist gaol. Stuart explicitly acknowledges the lie in the book, so I don't feel that he fooled himself or betrayed his principles.

An interesting story, interspersed with short sections on Anarchism, anarcho-syndicalism, and topics which fill in some of the background of the story, make for a very good and instructive read.

The Angry Brigade bit is less interesting, at least to me. I recall the name of course, but it sounded vaguely military to me (and of course did have some involvement with violence), which is ironic. Being only in my early teens around this time I had no real experience of life or work so didn't realise why they were so angry. The story of the trial and Christie's life afterwards (up to November 1975 when Franco died) let me see how little I was aware of what was going on in the UK and the world at that time. All I can recall from around that time is the end of the Vietnam war, and Nixon's fall from power--American news dominating my view of the world.

A good read I think.

Miquixote says

Mind-blowing, this guy actually tried to assassinate Franco, got thrown in Spanish jail for it, was let out years later(!) and then was falsely associated with the Angry Brigade attacks in England in the 70s. Very much an adventure story, but real! If it weren't so off status quo, it should be a best-seller.

Matthew Antosh says

Just a quick review - I really enjoyed this book. The thrilling tale of a young lad's attempt to smuggle explosives to kill the fascist dictator of Spain, the arrest and prison experience of that lad, his freedom and re-arrest in Britain under suspicion of being a member of an urban "terrorist organization".

My only problem with the book is that the sense of time is kinda off, the 50s, 60s and 70s sort of blend into each other in a way that makes it a little hard to make a time frame for yourself. Other than that, it's a must read, both as an autobiography and as an introduction to anarchist politics.

Jennpants says

Wonderful writing style, easy to zip right through.

Like Ann Hanson's Direct Action, this was an autobiography that did nothing to glorify violence or violent acts -- despite the fact that both Hanson and Christie spent time in prisons for various "criminal" acts. They simply tell their stories of actions and reactions against the state/fascist dictators/people in power/etc.

Stephen CM says

This is the story of how Stuart Christie developed his politics and put them into action in the 60s and 70s, with a number of explosions and prison stays along the way. It's not Papillon but the story is engaging and peppered with lots of details about twentieth century radical movements.

Sean says

A engaging memoir by one of my favorite British anarchists. I knew of Christie primarily through his (now defunct) Brightcove website, which hosted hundreds of anarchist and left-wing videos, documentaries, and full-length movies in several languages. I was also acquainted with his ties to the Angry Brigade, Anarchist Black Cross, and the anti-Franco resistance movement, but never before had I heard the full story.

Christie relates his childhood days in working class Glasgow and traces his evolution as a radical with the conversational charm reserved only for those who hail from across the pond (or maybe the deep south). He describes his ill-fated plot to smuggle explosives into Spain, his subsequent imprisonment by the Franco regime, his eventual return home and the subsequent persecution he faced from the British Special Branch and MI6.

Most interesting to me were Christie's detailed accounts of the inner workings of the investigative and security forces in both Spain and Britain. In particular I was interested in Franco's use of Otto Skorzeny's Paladin Group, which was in it's founder's words, "an international directorship of strategic assault personnel [that would] straddle the watershed between paramilitary operations carried out by troops in uniforms and the political warfare which is conducted by civilian agents". Among the many autocratic regimes for which the Paladin Group did operations was the Greek military junta of 1967-73. How topical...

Phoenix says

for a book that wasn't intentionally written as comedy (well at least bi don't think it was), this is pretty funny. the book gives a good insight into the political atmosphere in regard to britain and spain, in a way that is different but just as accurate as any historical book on leftist politics during the 70s and 80s.

because it is written from an eyewitness account of what life was like in a political prison during franco's fascist regime, it adds a different insight and point of view into what living under fascism was like. the book is detailed with references for further reading and full explanations on points discussed in the book.

i would recommend the book to anyone who is interested in learning about recent political history but finds reading about history boring
