

PRISON MEMOIRS
OF AN ANARCHIST

Alexander Berkman



Introduction by

JOHN WILLIAM WARD

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John William Ward's essay on Alexander Berkman's Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist originally appeared in The New York Review of Books in 1970. It was composed against the background of the 1960s, with an eye to the rioting in America's inner cities and to the increasing violence of the opposition to the Vietnam War. But Ward also addresses a larger issue: the seemingly inescapable presence of violence in American social life. His reflections on that subject remain as pertinent today as when they were written.

ON JULY 23, 1892, Alexander Berkman, an immigrant Russian Jew, idealist, and anarchist, forced his way into the Pittsburgh office of Henry Clay Frick in order to kill him. The assassination was, in the anarchist tradition, to be an *attentat*,

a political deed of violence to awaken the consciousness of the people against their oppressors. Frick, manager of the Carnegie steel works while Andrew Carnegie was on vacation in Scotland, had crushed the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers in the infamous Homestead strike, which ended in a fatal battle between Pinkertons and strikers. Berkman was there to continue the struggle between the workers and their capitalist oppressors. He failed. He failed to kill Frick. He failed to arouse the workers. The outcome, instead, was a book, a classic in the literature of autobiography, *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*.

Prison Memoirs is one of those great works which somehow get lost and wait for time to find again. First published in 1912 by Emma Goldman's Mother Earth press, the book has had an underground reputation, but not many people know it. Why it may now find an audience is obvious enough. From *Newsweek* to I. F. Stone's newsletter, one finds references to Narodniks and Nihilists and Anarchists in editorials on the arson and bombing and terrorism which afflict our daily lives. Inevitably, we have the customary American reflex, a plenitude of panels and commissions.

Violence is nothing new to American culture but, as Hugh Davis Graham has said, there has been a curious historical amnesia about the subject. The historical volume of the National Commission on Violence, of which Professor Graham was one of the editors, is the first major attempt to redress the balance and provoke our collective memory. At such a moment, one may guess that Berkman will find readers. He should. *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* allows us to experience violence from the inside, to identify with a man who idealistically accepts terrorism as a political instrument.

But more important, in his exploration of the human ambiguity and political complexity of the violence to which he commits himself, Berkman forces a question on us. Does the terrible violence which has characterized American culture through-

out its history, along with our inability to understand it, derive from our best and noblest ideals about the meaning and the promise of American life? Is violence, rather than some mad aberration, an intrinsic and understandable part of America?

I

Berkman's style is that of the naive, direct, simple, and seemingly artless. He writes in the first person, in a continuing present tense, generally in simple declarative sentences, perhaps because he writes in English and not in his native language. He apostrophizes often in an embarrassing way. Some of the set pieces in *Prison Memoirs* seem to come straight from a sentimental novel. But the sometimes mawkish manner cannot conceal a remarkable self-scrutiny and a sure juxtaposition of scene and image which express a supple imagination and a penetrating psychology.

On the first page, Berkman plunges directly into the news of Homestead, the bloody battle between the workers and the Pinkertons, the crushing of the Amalgamated Association, the single largest and most powerful union of the time, and starts on his train trip to Pittsburgh to assassinate Henry Clay Frick. The journey starts him also on the trail of his own memories, back to his student days in Russia, to his own youthful rebellion and groping attempts to understand, to his violent estrangement from his mother and her death in his arms before they are reconciled, before he can tell her that he is full of compassion and love for her. As he bows his head over his dead mother, the doctor puts his hand on his shoulder; at that instant, a coarse and swarthy laborer in the seat behind in the train reaches forward to speak to him, and we are back with Berkman on his fateful trip.

A collage of news, visual impressions, youthful memories,

and idealistic aspirations overlay and run one into another. The effect, however, is single: to define the abyss between Berkman's ideal hopes for mankind and the grim reality of man's condition. He came to America, hounded from Russia as a "wolf," he says, because "there, beyond the ocean, was the land of noble achievement, a glorious free country, where men walked erect in the full stature of manhood—the very realization of my youthful dreams." Like many native American writers, he renders the contrast between the dream and the reality through images of the landscape. Against the infernal present of Homestead with its stink and soot and cinders, Berkman places a vision of arcadian bliss, sunshine, "green woods and yellow fields."

This is not to say that Alexander Berkman, Russian Jew, immigrant and anarchist, had somehow attached himself to a native American pastoral tradition. Quite the contrary. As Paul Avrich, in his fine book *The Russian Anarchists*, has pointed out, the anarchist tradition in Russia stretches back to the seventeenth-century peasant revolts of Stenka Razin (whom Berkman explicitly invokes), and the myth of a world of free, uncoerced mutuality derives from the dream of a lost Golden Age located in the "primitive bliss of Medieval Russia, when, supposedly, there was 'neither Tsar nor state' but only 'land and liberty.'" One may find the same figurative pattern, with its theme made explicit and programmatic, in Kropotkin's *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1898). But if Berkman carried his dream of idyllic freedom with him from Russia, the American myth of an Eden of natural harmony where men walked erect in freedom twisted that dream into nightmarish shape.

II

Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist is divided into three unequal

parts. The first short section gives us quickly the *attentat*, the attempted political assassination of Henry Clay Frick, the "Caesar" of American capitalism, a tyrant to be killed in order to awaken the oppressed, the glorious and beloved People. The last short section gives us Berkman's return to life, his deep despondency which brings him to the verge of suicide, before he finds "work" to do and achieves his resurrection from the living death of fourteen years in a Pennsylvania state penitentiary. Most of the book deals with the experience of prison. The continuous present tense gives *Prison Memoirs* the air of a continuing diary of Berkman's efforts to survive physically and mentally the brutal and degrading conditions of those long years. But we know, especially from Emma Goldman's account in *Living My Life*, that Berkman wrote his story after prison, looking back over the terrible years.

As bizarre as the circumstances of Berkman's life may be, *Prison Memoirs* belongs to the genre, if one cares to classify it, of the *Bildungsroman*, the story of the formation of a young man, his coming to maturity. The "I" of the story undergoes change and development; as he writes, Berkman leads us toward his altered conception of himself as he re-creates the experience which led to change. That change involves two major themes in the book: first, a change in Berkman's relation to other human beings, a change in his assumptions about human nature; second, a change in his understanding of the political meaning of the deed of violence.

At the outset, Berkman draws the conventional anarchist distinction between murder and political assassination:

Human life is, indeed, sacred and inviolate. But the killing of a tyrant, of an enemy of the People, is in no way to be considered as the taking of a life. . . . True, the Cause often calls upon the revolutionist to commit an unpleas-

ant act; but it is the test of the true revolutionist—nay, more, his pride—to sacrifice all merely human feeling at the call of the People's cause.

Could anything be nobler than to die for a grand, a sublime Cause? Why, the very life of a true revolutionist has no other purpose, no significance whatever, save to sacrifice it on the altar of the beloved People. And what could be higher in life than to be a true revolutionist? It is to be a *man*, a complete MAN. A being who has neither personal interests nor desires above the necessities of the Cause; one who has emancipated himself from being merely human, and has risen above that, even to the height of conviction which excludes all doubt, all regret; in short, one who in the very inmost of his soul feels himself revolutionist first, human afterwards.

In Pittsburgh, Berkman adopts a pseudonym, Rakhmetov, taking the name from the arch-revolutionist in Chernyshevsky's novel, *What Is To Be Done?* But he rejects the need to prepare himself, as did his namesake, to withstand pain. He finds it a "sign of weakness. Does a real revolutionist need to prepare himself, to steel his nerves and harden his body? I feel it almost a personal insult, this suggestion of the revolutionist's mere human clay."

Berkman's celebration of the ideal revolutionary hero glorifies the man who, through commitment to a noble cause, transcends the limitations of being "merely human." Devoted to the cause of humanity, one transcends the human condition, is beyond good and evil, beyond the fear of death and the claims of mortality. The ideal is put to the test when Berkman shoots Frick. Fearful that Frick may be wearing an armored vest, Berkman shoots at Frick's head, hits him but fails to kill. Struggling free of the grasp of another man in Frick's office, he fires and hits the wounded Frick again. He is overpowered for a mo-

ment, but shakes himself free; his pistol misfires, and he crawls toward Frick and stabs him with a homemade dagger in the leg and thigh. Finally, clubbed with a hammer, by a carpenter, Berkman is overcome:

An officer pulls my head back by the hair, and my eyes meet Frick's. He stands in front of me, supported by several men. His face is ashen gray; the black beard is streaked with red, and blood is oozing from his neck. For an instant a strange feeling, as of shame, comes over me; but the next moment I am filled with anger at the sentiment, so unworthy of a revolutionist.

That fleeting moment when Berkman sees Frick's bloodied face before him and hesitates, almost surrenders to the feeling of shame, that fleeting moment is intensely important because it illuminates the special kind of violence possible only to man, the human animal. The object of attack, in this instance, Frick, is deprived of his individuality and his humanity because Berkman has turned him into an object, a symbol of the repressive forces of capitalism. It is not Frick, the man, but Frick, the symbol, there before Berkman. Berkman must do the same to himself. He must deny his own humanity, his own feeling, and turn himself into an instrument of a cause, a symbol of a revolutionary ideology.

Berkman carries the same attitude with him into prison. His sentimental glorification of the People and Humanity (always in upper case) provides no room in his affections for ordinary, flawed human beings. He shrinks from familiarity with other prisoners. "They are not of *my* world," he writes, sealed off from them by his idealized conception of himself as more than human. "I would aid them," he says, "as in duty bound to the victims of social injustice. But I cannot be friends with them. . . . By virtue of my principles, rather than their deserts, I

must give them my intellectual sympathy; they touch no chord in my heart." The chaplain who is kind to Berkman is still just a "cog" in the prison machinery. He feels disdain for the petty pickpockets, the "dips," and revulsion for the entertaining homosexual who thinks Berkman might become his "kid."

Gradually, though, Berkman comes to realize that humanity is no grand abstraction. It is made up of pitiful, stunted, hurt human beings. The organized violence of the prison, the sadism of the guards, the self-degradation of compulsive masturbation and forced buggery, the horrors of the creeping insanity of "crank row," the economic and human corruption of unchecked power, all these make the prison a microcosm of the wretched civilization Berkman wishes to destroy; but they also make him realize that to do violence to a human being means simply that, to do violence to a human being. Berkman comes finally to recognize what he calls his "coldly impersonal" way. Of an aged, but still flippant, burglar, he thinks:

With the severe intellectuality of revolutionary tradition, I thought of him and his kind as inevitable fungus growths, the rotten fruit of a decaying society. Unfortunate derelicts, indeed, yet parasites, almost devoid of humanity. But the threads of comradeship have slowly been woven by common misery. . . . Not entirely in vain are the years of suffering that have wakened my kinship with the humanity of *les misérables*.

Again, when he hears of the assassination of the King of Italy by the anarchist, Bresci, Berkman approves, thinks Bresci did well, but then goes on: "Yet, I feel that the individual, in certain cases, is of more direct and immediate consequence than humanity. What is [humanity] but the aggregate of individual existences—and shall these, the best of them, forever be

sacrificed for the metaphysical collectivity?"

The climax of Berkman's emotional and intellectual journey comes when he receives the news in prison of the assassination of President McKinley by Leon Czolgosz. When first taken by the police, Czolgosz said he was an anarchist. Although he later repudiated the statement, the hunt was on for all known anarchists, and Czolgosz's slender acquaintance with Emma Goldman led to her quick arrest in Chicago. While McKinley was dying, Emma said to a reporter that, although she was sympathetic to Czolgosz, she would gladly, as a nurse, care for McKinley. Berkman wrote Emma (the "girl" in *Prison Memoirs*) a clandestine letter:

You were splendid, dear; and I was especially moved by your remark that you would faithfully nurse the wounded man, if he required your services. . . . That remark discovered to me the great change wrought in us by the ripening years. Yes, in us, in both, for my heart echoed your beautiful sentiment. How impossible such a thought would have been to us in the days of a decade ago! We should have considered it treason to the spirit of revolution; it would have outraged all our traditions even to admit the humanity of an official representative of capitalism.

And Berkman draws the conclusion: "the stupendous task of human regeneration will be accomplished only by the purified vision of hearts that grow not cold."

Berkman never ceased to be an anarchist. As in Bruno Bettelheim's account in *The Informed Heart* of how one stays alive under conditions of total power and nearly total degradation, Berkman survives because the prison is always more than a prison to him. It is a testing ground for his theory. The remark-

able thing is that he learns what it means to be human, that to love humanity means to love the least of men. As he moves from a cold and abstract idealism to a warm and sympathetic identification, even to an unembarrassed and untroubled acceptance of the reality of homosexual love, Berkman discovers what it means to be a man.

Closely related to the change in Berkman's attitude toward human nature is the change in his understanding of the political complexity of the violent deed. The second theme as well as the first finds its formal conclusion in the same long letter to Emma Goldman. After the fine phrase, "human regeneration will be accomplished only by the purified vision of hearts that grow not cold," Berkman goes on: "I share your view entirely; for that very reason, it is the more distressing to disagree with you in one very important particular: the value of Leon's act." Berkman then draws a distinction between an individual act and a social act, between the impulse of a tortured and demented individual like Czolgosz and the probable social effect.

"To prove of value," Berkman argues, acts of violence "must be motivated by social rather than individual necessity, and be directed against a real and immediate enemy of the people." He rejects the educational effect of the assassination of President McKinley because, he says, "the social necessity for its performance was not manifest." And he pursues the point: "That you may not misunderstand, I repeat: as an expression of personal revolt it was inevitable, and in itself an indictment of existing conditions. But the background of social necessity was lacking, and therefore the value of the act was to a great extent nullified."

Why Berkman thought the "background of social necessity was lacking" is crucial, but, first, it is necessary to point out the drastic qualification Berkman has made to the rationale for

the anarchist deed of violence. We can measure how drastic by Emma Goldman's response. After the first emotional shock, Emma thought, "Why Sasha [Berkman] is using the same argument against Leon [Czolgosz] that Johann Most had urged against Sasha. Most had proclaimed the futility of individual acts of violence in a country devoid of proletarian consciousness and he had pointed out that the American worker did not understand the motives of such deeds."

Emma's recollection here deals with one of the more colorful moments in the sectarian history of anarchism. When Emma and Berkman first met, Johann Most was the acknowledged leader and inspiration of the tiny foreign anarchist movement in the United States. For a while, both Most and Berkman were Emma's lovers, which complicated matters beyond potential theoretical differences. When Berkman tried to assassinate Frick, Most repudiated the deed for precisely the reason that Emma names here: the American worker was not sufficiently advanced to understand the meaning of the deed. When Most spoke in New York City, and Emma heard he might repeat his attack on Berkman, she went to the meeting with a long bull-whip wrapped around her body beneath her coat, and when Most began his attacks on her beloved Sasha, Emma leaped to the stage and whipped him out of the hall.

Now Emma found Berkman in the same position Most had taken ten years before. Berkman has introduced an element of pragmatic political calculation into his assessment of the wisdom of violence. In his idealistic youth, Berkman dreamed that to assassinate Frick would awaken the consciousness of the working class, would startle the worker out of his lethargic and repressed condition, and identify for him his enemy. The deed of violence would create the revolution.

But Johann Most was right. When Berkman went to prison, he discovered that no one could understand why he had tried to kill Frick, not even the Homestead workers there in prison

themselves. Other prisoners thought there must have been some personal quarrel between Berkman and Frick, or some "business misunderstanding." Or they thought Berkman was simply crazy. Not only those in prison. The union in Homestead immediately dissociated itself from Berkman's act, and sent condolences to Frick with the message that they prayed for his speedy recovery.

But Berkman, in his letter to Emma, did not simply resign himself to misunderstanding. He understood with remarkable precision why conditions in America made all the difference.

In Russia, where political oppression is popularly felt, such a deed would be of great value. But the scheme of political subjection is more subtle in America. And though McKinley was the chief representative of our modern slavery, he could not be considered in the light of a direct and immediate enemy of the people; while in an absolutism, the autocrat is visible and tangible. The real despotism of republican institutions is far deeper, more insidious, because it rests on the popular delusion of self-government and independence. That is the subtle source of democratic tyranny, and, as such, it cannot be reached with a bullet.

By comparing Russia and the United States Berkman does not, of course, say that there is no oppression in the United States and that there is no need for conflict, but that the real repression in American society, what Berkman names "despotism," derives from the generally shared belief that one *is* independent, one *is* self-governing. Berkman points, in other words, to the ideology which is immune to revolution and violent action, which cannot be "reached with a bullet." He goes on to make a distinction between political and economic repression in order to insist upon the worth of his own deed of

violence, perhaps because of the need to believe that his years in jail were not in vain, but then comes back to the act of political assassination: do these "rockets of iron," he asks, does this "lightning really illumine the social horizon, or merely confuse minds with the succeeding darkness?"

Along with his awareness that the revolutionist's dream may only sacrifice people to the myth of the "People," the collectivity which has no room for actual, concrete, living individuals, Berkman came to realize that violence, the decision to kill, finds no sanction in some transcendent ideal, but is finally to be justified only in relation to historical necessity which, in turn, demands political calculation and a pragmatic estimate of the consequences.

III

At this point, an unwary reader may breathe a sigh of relief, glad that Berkman has come to recognize the inhumanity of his revolutionary ideal and the political inconsequence of direct violence, especially in the United States. But that is a false moral and a sentimental conclusion to draw from *Prison Memoirs*. Berkman is not saying that violence has no place in American life. He is saying that violence cannot be understood by Americans because of the ideology which holds captive even those who are the oppressed. The American creed of an open, egalitarian society means that there can be no violent protest against the conditions of American society because there can be no real cause for it. The act of violence cannot be understood. It must be the act of a deranged and mad individual. It escapes historical understanding.

To say that because of our ideals violence should not happen here is not to say that it does not happen here. Statistically, both in individual and collective acts of violence, the

United States far surpasses any other Western society. In the straightforward language of the final report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, "The United States is the clear leader among modern stable democratic nations in its rates of homicide, assault, rape, robbery, and it is at least among the highest in the incidence of group violence and assassination." In that context, the use of the word "stable" may seem rather heavy-handed irony, but it points to a curious aspect of the phenomenon of violence in America: the violence which has marked our history has rarely been directed against the state. Our political institutions have been little affected by it. Which is what Berkman pointed out: violence has had no political meaning in American consciousness. Berkman hints at why this is so: Americans believe deeply that they enjoy self-government and personal independence.

When Americans insist that American society is free, they generally mean that American society is a society in which each individual, irrespective of extrinsic associations of family, neighborhood, class, race, or ethnic origin, is free to make of himself what he can. More is involved than classical liberalism or laissez-faire capitalism. As Emerson put it, "Government will be adamantine without any governor." That was the millennial promise of America, a benign anarchism in which each individual was to be the bearer of his own destiny and society no more than a collection of individual wills. It was that very dream which drew Berkman to America: "There, beyond the ocean, was the land of noble achievement, a glorious free country, where men walked erect in the full stature of manhood."

A society which believes that it is the result of the actions of free and equal and self-reliant individuals has, logically, no reason to suppose that the state and the institutions of society are important. To the degree one believes that America is a

uniquely free society, that each person is unencumbered by forces beyond the determination of his own personality, to the degree such an ideal has power over one's mind and imagination, there is no way to understand violence except as irrational and aberrant. Our difficulty in understanding violence in America is, in part at least, a consequence of our insistence that ours is a society of equality and opportunity and individual freedom. To ask questions about the reality of violence would force us to ask questions about the reality of our ideals.

Furthermore, our ideology, to the degree it is believed in and acted upon, leads to intense frustration which easily spills over into violent behavior when the social situation, the daily, lived experience of actual people, blocks and prevents them from acting out what they are told is ideally possible. After the ghetto riots in Watts and Newark and Detroit, a study was made of those who could be identified as participants. In the Detroit study, blacks who were actors in the riot, that is, those who were apprehended in overt acts from breaking a window to sniping, were asked whether they believed that if one had sufficient will and desire he could make of himself what he wanted in American society. A majority of those ghetto blacks said yes. There is a fact. What is one to make of it?

Not to much, perhaps, without knowing more. Was it a white man or a black man who asked the question? The blacks who answered were in the hands of the police and might well have wanted to assure everyone of their benign disposition toward American society. But to accept the fact on its face, one conclusion is that the most aggressive blacks were precisely those who believed they were free to seize the advantages of American life and, when blocked from doing so, reacted with rage and violence. One sociologist put it, as sociologists like to put it, that violence varies inversely with the presence of avenues to status and power, and avenues of legitimate modes

of protest.

At yet a lower level, as Herman Melville put it, our ideals and values are even more deeply involved in the high incidence of violence in America. The traditional American emphasis on individualism and self-determination entails a weakening of institutional forms of restraint with the consequence of a relatively high statistical incidence of aberrant behavior. To put it paradoxically, a liberal, free society must be a repressive society: freedom from external restraint means that the individual must internalize the values of the culture, and restrain himself. He must be, as we say, self-governing; he must repress his antisocial impulses in order to remain free.

A society such as ours, which increasingly rejects the sanctions of tradition, the family, the church, and the power of the state, necessarily must create the kind of personality who is self-governing, self-restraining, self-repressive. The founding fathers, following the Roman model, defined the essential quality as virtue; Emerson called it character; the Protestant evangelical tradition named it benevolence. The tradition is a long one, and we may respond warmly to some of its phrases, but we should not in our self-congratulation ignore the enormous psychic burden such an ideal places upon the individual. Until we reach the millennium of American democratic hopes, we must accept the probable instability of our society, especially when it denies the opportunity and self-respect which its ideology constantly celebrates.

Most interestingly, the rejection of violence as somehow un-American blinds us to the forms of violence, both official and private, which have in fact dominated American history. Consider the occasion of Berkman's deed: the Carnegie Steel Company imported a private army of 300 Pinkertons, the condottieri of industrial warfare in the late nineteenth century. The company held back its ultimatum to labor until it com-

pleted an order for steel plate for the United States Navy, whose power was needed to shield American commercial expansion. A lynch mob, after Berkman's assassination attempt, pillaged and destroyed a utopian anarchist community outside Pittsburgh. Finally, the state militia, welcomed by the Homestead workers who believed that the state was a neutral umpire, broke the strike and escorted scabs back to work. Such particulars support an important generalization: violence has been used again and again to support the structure of authority in American society. We are only puzzled when violence is used to attack that structure.

Our ideals are involved even here. The insistence that all men are free and equal leads to the curious consequence of a mass conformity and a mood of intolerance for dissent in any form. Tocqueville provided the classic statement, which still holds, that the energetic individualism and the tyranny of the majority in America both derived from the ideal of equality. The necessary obverse of the belief that "I'm as good as you are" is acceptance of the fact that "You are as good as I am." The basis of one's own self-trust and self-sufficiency must be extended to all the equal others in society. So, if one is in a minority, one has no claim against a tyrannous majority. The very ideal of the equal worth of every man, which promises a world of manly, independent, and free men, perversely leads to the mind and mood of the mass man who is intolerant of any deviation from what he thinks. That majority may be silent, but it has throughout American history been ready always to wreak its own repressive violence on the rash individual who dares to challenge it or call into question the ideology which creates and sustains it. The fault, as Berkman would have it, lies in American consciousness: "that is the subtle source of democratic tyranny, and, as such, it cannot be reached with a bullet." If that is so, the keepers of that consciousness, Amer-

ican intellectuals, have dismally failed in their responsibility to American society. One of the functions of the intellectual is to raise to consciousness the ambiguities inherent in the professed ideals of society, and to make clear the meaning of the social forces implicit in the actions of society which contradict those ideals. We have failed to see that the ugly violence of our society is not an aberration of an otherwise sound and healthy society, but the unintended and unforeseen consequence of our most cherished ideals. We must act on our ideals, or change our minds.

“The struggle,” to use Barrington Moore’s words, “concerns contemporary capitalist democracy’s capacity to, live up to its noble professions, something no society has ever done. . . . As one peers ever deeper to resolve the ambiguities of history, the seeker eventually finds them in himself and his fellow men as well as in the supposedly dead facts of history. We are inevitably in the midst of the ebb and flow of those events and play a part, no matter how small and insignificant as individuals, in what the past will come to mean for the future.”

There is, in the alien experience of Alexander Berkman, as in all great books, much to discover about ourselves. We affect history in the attempt to understand it. In this sense, simply to read is inevitably a political act. As we attempt to understand the meaning of violence in the American experience, Berkman is not a bad prophet for the condition in which we find ourselves. He may at last have found the moment when we can hear what he is saying.

—JOHN WILLIAM WARD