Fire and Passion

The Life of Ukrainian Anarchist Maria Nikiforova

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Maria Nikiforova is perhaps the most famous female anarchist who operated on the territory of the former Russian Empire and Ukraine. This is probably why many legends and outright fictions arose around the personality of this legendary anarchist, some of which we will try to dispel in this article.

Maria Hryhorivna Nikiforova was born in 1888 (possibly 1885). Her precise place of birth is unknown. According to some sources, it was the town of Pechenikovo, Starodubskyi district, Chernihiv province; according to others, she was born in the village of Levshikovo, Oleksandrivskyi district, Katerynoslav province.

There exists a romantic version of her origins that Nikiforova came from the nobility and that at the age of 16, she fell in love with an officer, ran away from home, was abandoned by her lover and was forced to earn a living on her own—as a nanny, a street vendor, and a bottle washer at a vodka factory. In reality, Nikiforova was the daughter of a peasant, and the only education she received, in her own words, was in the home. There is simply no other reliable information about her early youth.

In the early 1900s, while working as a seamstress, Nikiforova joined the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs), then switched to the anarch0- communists. This happened either in Oleksandrivsk city (now Zaporizhzhia) or Katerynoslav (now Dnipro). She was an agitator, then joined a fighting squad and participated in terrorist attacks against the local bourgeoisie and the police. By 1907, Nikiforova lived in Starodub, where she was one of the leaders of a revolutionary group that included young anarchists, SRs and SR Maximalists. They conducted propaganda among the city's workers and the neighbouring settlement of Klintsy, as well as engaged in armed actions.

In Starodub, Nikiforova was arrested for the first time in 1907 while trying to commit suicide—fortunately, unsuccessfully. Accusations of terror carried the threat of the death penalty, so Maria insisted to the investigators and the medical commission that she was born in 1889. This made her a minor and allowed her to hope for a lighter sentence. And so, it happened. On October 13, 1907, the Provisional Military Court in Chernihiv found Nikiforova guilty of belonging to the anarcho-communists, participating in the murder of a Starodub police officer, and robbing a priest. She was sentenced to hanging, but when the sentence was confirmed, the execution was commuted to 20 years of hard labour due to her falsified age.

A year after the trial, Nikiforova was transferred to Moscow. The accompanying documents noted: "Prone to escape. In the common cell, she is a leader and agitator. It's a good idea to keep her in solitary. Requires especially vigilant supervision as an important criminal."

Upon her arrival in Moscow in May 1909, Nikiforova was imprisoned in the Moscow Provincial Women's Hard Labour Prison. She shared a cell with two other political radicals: Natalya Klimova, an SR Maximalist serving an indefinite term organizing an assassination attempt on Peter Stolypin, the Russian Minister of the Interior; and Ekaterina Nikitina, another Maximalist.

Twenty years later, Nikitina claimed in her memoirs, among other things, that Nikiforova's "real name" was not Maria but Vladimir and that she was neither a woman nor a man but a hermaphrodite. Nikitina's salacious story about Nikiforova's ambiguous gender has gained popularity since the 1990s and is still being retold despite any evidence. Nikiforova's personal file from the Moscow Women's Prison archives states: "Distinctive features: none"; "Marital status: unmarried." The only detail given about the state of her health is anemia. Noticeably, the doctors of the prison department did not notice any "spicy" special features.

Nikiforova spent less than two months in Moscow prison. By the time she arrived, an outside group composed of various revolutionary organizations was preparing an assault on the prison. This motley crew of jailbreakers included the young Vladimir Mayakovsky, soon to gain fame as the most important Russian futurist poet. The main goal of the conspirators was to free Nikiforova's cellmate, Klimova, but other prisoners also had the opportunity to escape. On the evening of July 1, 1909, the warden opened the cell doors, handed over free clothes to the prisoners, and led them out into the corridor. Having descended from the second floor using knotted sheets, thirteen prisoners escaped into the street. Liberated, they broke up into small groups and, accompanied by escorts, went to safe houses.

After the escape, Nikiforova ended up in Western Europe. She lived in Paris and Brussels, belonged to anarchist groups, and maintained relations with many Russian emigrants. There are several legends about Nikiforova's life abroad. One of them claims that Nikiforova was a student at Auguste Rodin's School of Painting and Sculpture in Paris.

Another less plausible myth is that when the First World War broke out, Nikiforova enrolled in an officer school in Paris, from which she graduated in 1916, and then, as part of the French army, participated in battles on the Thessaloniki front in Greece before returning to Russian in 1917. Considering Nikiforova's activities in 1917, this series of events is more than doubtful. Moreover, it is simply impossible to imagine that a combat officer would be released from active duty in the army during the World War. One way or another, upon returning to Russia, Nikiforova never declared her "officer rank" but identified photography as her profession.

Returning to her homeland in June 1917, Nikiforova settled in St. Petersburg (then called Petrograd) and joined the Petrograd Federation of Anarchist-Communists (PFAK), which at that time was preparing an armed uprising against the Provisional Government. From the first days of her life in the capital, she carried out active agitation and propaganda work, delivering speeches to soldiers and workers. She had an undoubted oratorical talent; Kyiv resident Zora Gandlevskaya recalled that she "could speak at rallies for 3–4 hours passionately and captivate the audience with her persuasiveness, passion, and erudition."

But Nikiforova's activities were not limited to propaganda alone: on June 18, she participated in an armed attack by anarchists on St. Petersburg's Kresty Prison and the liberation of her comrades. This action provoked the Russian government into destroying PFAK's headquarters

and arresting a number of its activists. Nikiforova was also detained but was released a few days later, like most of the arrested.

In August 1917, Nikiforova moved to Oleksandrivsk and became the most well-known and respected member of the Oleksandrivsk Federation of Anarchists. Under her leadership, the Federation became a mass organization that enjoyed a strong influence among the workers and peasants of the city and surrounding district. Nikiforova very quickly gained wide popularity in the Ukrainian anarchist movement. She travelled throughout the district, calling for a struggle against all existing authorities and the construction of a free anarchist society. During this period, she first met Nestor Makhno and other anarchists from Huliaipole. But Nikiforova did not limit herself to propaganda alone: by the fall, she had formed a fighting squad ("a detachment of anarcho-terrorists"), which began expropriating the local bourgeoisie. The first victim was the Oleksandrivsk factory owner Bardovsky, from whom the anarchists seized a million rubles. Part of the money was transferred to the city's Soviet of Workers' Deputies and other revolutionary organizations.

At the end of September 1917, Nikiforova was arrested by order of the Oleksandrivsk district executive committee, whose moderate leadership she accused of counter-revolution. In response, anarchists, including Makhno, who was in Oleksandrivsk, called on the city workers to stage a general strike. As a result, Nikiforova was released; however, a few weeks later, she was arrested again, this time for organizing expropriations. The second imprisonment also did not last long. Her release was quickened by events in St. Petersburg when, on October 26, the Bolsheviks staged a coup, launching the revolution into a new and bloodier stage.

After October, several regional centers of power opposed to Lenin's government arose. The most important of them were the Ukrainian People's Republic, the government of the Don Cossacks, and later the White Army. Russian and Ukrainian anarchists maintained a tactical bloc with the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs, who promised to continue the revolution. The anarchists, in turn, bided their time, waiting for the moment when Lenin's government "became clearly counter-revolutionary" to oppose it.

The inevitability of civil war was obvious, and weaponry became the principal means of settling disputes between different political forces. Therefore, Nikiforova and her squad of "anarcho-terrorists" began to disarm the military units of the old army, keeping the weapons for themselves or transferring them to like-minded groups in other Ukrainian cities.

In mid-December, the Left Bloc of Bolsheviks, Left Socialist Revolutionaries and Anarchists in Oleksandrivsk attempted to take control of the city. After intense street fighting, on January 4, 1918, local soviet power was established in Oleksandrivsk, with Nikiforova elected as the chairperson of the city's Military Revolutionary Committee (Revkom). According to Makhno, she was worried that the Revkom would turn into a new government body. To prevent this, and true to her anarchist convictions, she informed the city's workers about all the Revkom's decisions and internal workings.

On the instructions and funds received from the Bolshevik government, Nikiforova formed her own armed unit—the Free Combat Druzhina, numbering about 600 fighters with artillery and machine guns—a relatively large military force at the time. In mid-January, the unit went to the Don, where it fought with the Cossacks of General Kaledin and then participated in the establishment of Soviet power in the cities of southern Crimea. At the end of the month, Nikiforova's Druzhina returned to the Ukrainian steppes, where the struggle between supporters of the Left Bloc and the Ukrainian People's Republic was in full swing.

Returning to Oleksandrivsk after a month-long absence, Nikiforova and her fighters entered into a new conflict with the Bolsheviks, this time with the leadership of the local soviet, considering its actions a "usurpation of power." At first, the matter was limited to mutual accusations, but by February 20, disagreements reached a climax: the Free Druzhina arrested members of the city executive committee, and there was a shootout with a group of Red Guards. Those arrested were released on the same day, but Nikiforova refused to continue working with them and, as a principled opponent of the authorities, demonstratively resigned from all Soviet bodies.

During this period, the German-Austrian offensive to occupy Ukraine began. The Free Combat Druzhina announced a new recruitment of volunteers, increasing its number to almost a thousand people. At the beginning of March 1918, Nikiforova's anarchists fought against the German-Austrian troops for more than a month, slowly retreating along the railways from the Kyiv region to the Northern Azov region. As before, her Free Combat Druzhina practiced requisitions and confiscations on a broad scale, although, in many cases, impostors acted on behalf of Nikiforova and her fighters, no different from ordinary bandits.

The Ukrainian Bolsheviks were dissatisfied with Nikiforova for another reason. As a staunch opponent of statism, she often dispersed local soviets that had arrogated too many rights to themselves or simply sabotaged the fight against the external threat. Nikiforova retained the highest reputation and genuine popularity among two categories of the population: anarchists protesting against "continuous persecution by the Bolsheviks and the bourgeoisie;" and the Red Army military command, who considered the Druzhina one of the most combat-ready units in Ukraine, and Nikiforova herself a talented commander—while being possibly the only female military leader in the country. The commander-in-chief of the Red Army in Ukraine, Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko himself, stated: "Marusya is a fighter, she is engaged selflessly in combat and keeping her detachment in iron discipline. She has behaved no worse, but in fact better, than many of the vaunted Soviet leaders who fled in cowardly fashion, grabbing their belongings and families, long before the arrival of the Germans."

On April 17, 1918, the Free Combat Druzhina arrived in Taganrog, the temporary capital of "Red" Ukraine, which the German Army had almost completely captured. On the same day, the Druzhina was disarmed, and Nikiforova herself was arrested by order of the Bolshevik section of the All-Ukrainian Central Executive Committee. She was charged with the destruction of the city Elisavetgrad, unauthorized requisitions and executions, and disobeying military orders. However, nothing incriminating was found after a search of her Free Druzhina: no valuables ("gold and diamonds"), no money, and no expensive items—only weapons, ammunition, food, and other property needed for the army.

The arrest of a popular commander caused unrest among anarchists, Left SRs, and Red Army soldiers. The Central Executive Committee received threats: "For Marusya, we will crush you." Antonov- Ovseenko himself sent a telegram defending Nikiforova. Under these conditions, the Bolsheviks avoided aggravating the conflict and included representatives of the Left SRs and anarchists in a "court of revolutionary honour" to review Nikiforova's case. After interviewing many witnesses, the court declared all the charges unproven.

At the end of May 1918, the Soviet authorities organized the disarmament of all anarchist detachments retreating from Ukraine to Tsaritsyn. As a result, the remnants of Nikiforova's Druzhina were disbanded. With several companions, including Nestor Makhno, Nikiforova left for Saratov, where she effectively lived illegally. The reason for this was renewed threats from the

prominent Ukrainian Bolsheviks, who were extremely dissatisfied with her acquittal and again demanded the arrest and execution of the "bandit Marusya."

On June 20, 1918, Nikiforova was discovered and arrested in Saratov. A few days later, she was sent to Moscow, where she was imprisoned in Butyrka Prison. On August 9, 1918, the Moscow Revolutionary Tribunal's investigative commission began an investigation into the Nikiforova case.

In August 1918, Moscow anarchists began a campaign to release their comrade-in-arms. The movement's most prominent figures, as well as the Red Army commander Antonov-Ovseenko, submitted petitions and statements. The campaign was successful: on September 21, Nikiforova was released on bail from Butyrka pending trial.

While awaiting trial, Nikiforova joined the Proletkult studio to study painting. According to the recollections of Margarita Sabashnikova, the secretary of the painting department of Proletkult, Maria often acted as a delegate for students who complained about unsatisfactory study conditions and insufficient attention from teachers.

The First All-Russian Congress of Anarcho-Communists was held in Moscow from December 25 to 28, 1918. Nikiforova participated as a representative of the Ukrainian anarchists and made a report on the activities of anarchists in the insurgent movement. The Congress launched a protest in connection with Nikiforova's upcoming trial and stated, "that she was being brought to trial only because she had been brazenly slandered."

The trial of Nikiforova began in the Moscow Revolutionary Tribunal on January 21, 1919. Maria was accused "of armed opposition and discrediting the Soviet government and of disruptive actions while defending against external and internal enemies at a dangerous moment for the Revolution" and of massive illegal requisitions and robberies, which "caused disillusionment with the Soviet government in the South." Nikiforova denied the accusations, insisting on her innocence. Newspapers reported that "in her last words, the defendant declares that the revolutionary movement, and especially the revolutionary honour of the leaders of the South, are dear to her. In all her actions, she was guided only by the idea that workers and peasants should, as quickly as possible, take into their own hands everything they had created over the centuries. Equating her actions with banditry is tantamount to blaming the entire vanguard of the revolutionary leaders of the South for this."

There were no witnesses for the prosecution (partly because Ukraine was under German occupation)—only rumours and retellings of rumours were proffered as evidence against Nikiforova. However, the Bolshevik court also could not pass an acquittal in such a high-profile case, and therefore, it found a compromise solution. The charges of banditry and robbery were considered unproven. Still, Nikiforova was found guilty of "discrediting the Soviet government through her actions and the actions of her detachment in some cases and disobedience to certain local councils in the field of military operations." Taking into account the "revolutionary merits" of the defendant, the tribunal decided to prohibit her from "holding responsible positions for a period of six months from the date of the verdict."

Nikiforova immediately left for Ukraine, probably intending to resume her armed struggle against the counter-revolution. In February 1919, Nikiforova joined the Makhnovist movement, which was soon formed into the 3rd Trans-Dnieper Brigade as part of the Ukrainian Red Army. Makhno, seeking not to worsen his rather tricky relations with the Bolsheviks, obeyed the verdict against Nikiforova and removed her from any military work, instructing her to exclusively engage in cultural and educational activities in the Huliaipole region.

For several months, she started kindergartens, children's communes and schools and established medical services for the population. At the same time, she conducted anarchist propaganda among peasants and rebels and spoke at rallies, describing the Bolsheviks' persecution of anarchists in Russia and Ukraine. However, like the entire Makhnovist leadership of that time, she adhered to preserving the "united revolutionary front of all revolutionary parties standing on the platform of real Soviet power of the poorest peasants and workers." By contrast, her husband, Witold Brzostek, who remained in Moscow, apparently had a different point of view and, in the spring of 1919, began to form a group of underground anarchists to fight against the Reds.

On May 7, 1919, Lev Kamenev, one of the foremost leaders of the Bolsheviks, visited Huliaipole. Judging by his reports to Moscow, he was pleasantly surprised by the state of affairs in the Makhnovist region, including in the fields of culture and education, which Nikiforova was involved in. The personality of Nikiforova herself also made a most favourable impression on Kamenev, and upon returning to Moscow, he achieved a reduction in her sentence to three months. Now Maria could return to military work, which she did.

In mid-May 1919, the headquarters of the Makhnovist brigade sent her to Berdiansk, instructing her to form a new regiment of volunteers. Here, Maria was reunited with her husband, who had arrived from Moscow. In Berdyansk, Nikiforova continued her anarchist agitation, speaking at rallies criticizing the Bolsheviks' "commissar state."

However, Nikiforova did not have time to complete the formation of a regiment. At the beginning of June 1919, the Bolsheviks broke their military-political alliance with the Makhnovists and began military operations against them. Maria, her husband, and several other anarchists fled Berdiansk and went underground. At first, she wanted to assemble a partisan detachment to carry out attacks and sabotage on the railways in the rear of the White Army General Anton Denikin. However, due to a lack of weapons, she abandoned this plan. After that, she decided to return to the old proven means of political terror. In mid-June, a meeting of several dozen anarchists who supported her plans was held. Money for work was given to the underground by Makhno. After the meeting, three groups of militants were given assignments: the first made its way to Moscow, where it laid the foundation for the All-Russian Organization of Underground Anarchists; the second to Siberia, to carry out an assassination attempt on the White Army Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak; and the third, led by Nikiforova and Brzostek, planned to organize the murder of Denikin and General Yakov Slashchov.

At the beginning of August, the couple reached Sevastopol in Crimea, where they made contact with Zora Gandlevskaya. Zora was at the head of a small combat group and was preparing an assassination attempt on Denikin, who was expected in the city any day. Judging by Gandlevskaya's recollections, Nikiforova and Brzostek intended to participate in the murder and then leave for Poland. But the plan failed to manifest, and Nikiforova's fame led to her death.

In August 1919, by pure chance, Nikiforova ran into two White Army soldiers who had once been captured by her detachment. As privates, they were flogged by Nikiforova's order and released. Now, the soldiers recognized her, tracked her to her residence, and reported the address to the White counterintelligence.

This unfortunate turn of events led to Nikiforova and Brzostek's surprise arrest in a store, with no time to offer armed resistance. Brzostek attempted to bribe the arresting officers, who gladly accepted forty thousand rubles but did not release the couple. Gandlevskaya tried to organize an attack on the Sevastopol prison to release the pair, but the anarchists in the city were too weak to launch such an operation.

On September 16, a White military court examined the case of Maria Nikiforova on charges that "while commanding a detachment of anarchist communists in 1918–1919, she executed officers and civilians in Rostov-on- Don, Odesa and Melitopol, and called for bloody and merciless reprisals against the bourgeoisie and counter-revolutionaries."

Included in the specific charges was a description of Nikiforova's detachment's actions in Odesa, which she allegedly captured together with the "Petliurist" (Ukrainian People's Army) rebels, "and took part in the burning of the Odesa civilian prison, where the head of the prison was burned to death." The trouble is that Ukrainian troops took Odesa in December 1918, precisely when Nikiforova, as we recall, was in Moscow awaiting trial. As can be seen, legends around "Marusya" were also born in the White camp.

At the trial, Nikiforova "behaved defiantly and after the reading of the verdict began to scold the judges." She received a death sentence. The same sentence was handed down to Brzostek, who was accused of "harbouring" his wife, that is, of not reporting her crimes.

After the trial, Nikiforova was sent back to prison in a truck guarded by two dozen officers. According to Zora Gandlevskaya, she shouted all the way: "Long live anarchy! Long live freedom! Down with tyrants! Down with the White Guards!"

On the night of September 17, Maria Hryhorivna Nikiforova was shot in the courtyard of the women's building of the Sevastopol prison. The warden at the execution said that Maria herself commanded: "Fire!"

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