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Heroic Women of the Russian Revolution

Emma Goldman

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Pre-revolutionary Russia stood unique in the world's history for the host of remarkable and heroic women she contributed to the movement for liberation. Beginning with the "Decem-brists", the first political rebels against autocratic Tsardom, almost a century ago, whose wives voluntarily followed them into Siberian exile, down to the last day of the Romanov regime, Russian women have participated in every form of revolutionary activity and went to their death or to prison with a smile upon their lips.

In his vivid and powerful poem, "Russian Women", the poet Nekrassov¹ paid a high tribute to the fortitude and valour of the women who had sacrificed wealth, social station, and culture to wend their weary way across the frozen Northern plains in order to share the cruel fate of their imprisoned and exiled husbands. Later it was Ivan Turgenev who with fine feeling and sympathetic appreciation painted the picture of the Russian women revolutionists of his time. In his superb prose poem

¹ Nikolai Alekseevich Nekrasov (1821–1878)

“On the Threshold” he immortalised the exalted idealists of the Sophie Perovskaia² type of Russian women whose passionate faith and selfless devotion to liberty beacon-like illuminated the dark horizon of Russia in the early eighties.

The February Revolution of 1917 opened the prison doors to the survivors of the torture, the dungeon, and Siberian exile meted out by Tsarism to its political opponents. In triumph they were brought back to Moscow and Petrograd, scores of the revolutionists of the younger generation, among them such revered names as Maria Spiridonova, her intimate friend Alexandra Izmailovitch, Irena Kakhovskaya, Evgenia Ratner, Olga Taratuta³ – representing various political tendencies, but all inspired by a common love of the people and devotion to its cause.

Olga Taratuta, the daughter of intellectual parents, though of slight physique, possessed a powerful mentality and was in a certain sense a pioneer. When barely twenty she organised, together with several friends, the first Anarchist group in Southern Russia. It was a dangerous undertaking, and her activities soon attracted the attention of the political police. Arrested at the beginning of the revolution of 1905, Olga was doomed to 30 years’ katorga (hard labour prison) in Odessa. Ingenious and daring, she succeeded in escaping, again taking up her former work, this time under an assumed name. For a considerable time all the efforts of the gendarmerie to find her were fruitless, but in 1906 her disguise was discovered, she was re-arrested, and sentenced once more to 30 years’ prison.

² Sofija L’vovna Perovskaia (1853–1881) Russian revolutionary, member of Narodnaya Volya (People’s Will).

³ Maria Spiridonova (1884–1941), Alexandra Izmailovich (1878–1941), Irina Kakhovskaya (1887–1960) and Evgenia Ratner (1886–1931) were all members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party. Spiridonova and Izmailovich were killed by the NKVD in a mass execution of political prisoners. Ratner died of cancer in prison in Moscow. Olga Taratuta (1876–1938), anarchist. See libcom.org-

opinion’s sake. Now in the face of overwhelming evidence of cruellest oppression and persecution in Russia, the world remains silent and callous. The heroic martyrs are left to the tender mercies of the Tcheka, to suffer the Golgotha of the body as well as of the spirit, in the name of an ideal that has long since been betrayed by the Communist State and its Party dictatorship.

ate when the Tcheka took charge of her again. Guards with blood-hounds were placed at the house where Spiridonova was being ministered to by her devoted friend Alexandra Izmailovitch. Their every step was watched and existence made so unbearable that the tortured Maria demanded to be taken back to prison. Together with the inseparable Izmailovitch she was then ordered to a furthestmost corner of the Moscow Province, whence now the sad news comes that Spiridonova has been driven to the desperate method of hunger-striking in protest against her ceaseless persecution. From reliable sources has just arrived the information that both Izmailovitch and Spiridonova have been exiled to the wilds of Turkestan.

The martyrdom of the heroic women of Russia has become more poignant and intense under the tyranny of Bolshevik dictatorship than in the days of Tsarism. Then their suffering was merely physical, for nothing could affect their spirit. They knew that while they were hated by the autocracy, they enjoyed the respect and love of the vast masses of the Russian people. Indeed, the "simple folk" looked upon them as "holy ones" suffering in their cause, and the moral influence exerted by the politicals in prison, katorga, and exile was very great.

All that is changed now. The new autocrats of Russia have discredited the ideals of socialism and have besmirched the fair name of its exponents. There is no public voice in Russia save that of the ruling Party, and the martyrs – men and women – of revolutionary Russia have become pariahs in the fullest sense. They have no redress and no appeal to the conscience of their country, for the latter has been paralyzed. Alas, not only the conscience of Russia, but even that of the rest of the world seems to be silenced.

What has become of the sense of justice and generosity formerly extended by the Western world to the political victims of the Tsarist regime? Then liberty-loving English men and women were courageously outspoken in their protests against Russian iniquities and helpful in behalf of the persecuted for

On her return to freedom, in 1917, Olga devoted herself to the political Red Cross work, aiding the victims of the Hetman Skoropadsky regime in the Ukraine, and subsequently giving relief and cheer to the new groups of political prisoners created by the Communist State.

In the latter part of 1920 an All-Russian Conference of Anarchists was to take place at Kharkov. Though the gathering was to be held with the knowledge and consent of the Soviet Government, all the delegates were placed under arrest on the very eve of the Conference, without warning or explanation. Among the several hundred prisoners was also Olga Taratuta. She was sent to the Butyrki Prison, in Moscow, the very place where so many of her comrades had suffered and died in the days of the Romanov regime. There Olga underwent the most harrowing experience of her eventful life. On the night of April 25th the political wing of the prison was raided by the Tcheka, the prisoners were attacked in their sleep and badly maltreated, and then rushed to the railroad station – some of them with nothing on save their night clothes – and transferred to other prisons.

Olga found herself in the dreaded Orlov prison, which served as a central point of "distribution" under Nikolas II. The character of the administration and of the regimen of that prison were such as to drive the politicals quickly to a hunger strike in protest against their treatment. Olga was again removed to another prison, thence being sent out to exile in the dismal region of the Veliky Ustiug, and finally ordered to Kiev, where she had formerly ministered so devotedly to the Communist prisoners of the Hetman reaction. A recent letter of Olga to a friend abroad contains the significant remark that persecution by the Soviet Government has robbed her of more vitality than all the years of incarceration she had suffered at the hands of the Romanov autocracy.

Unlike Olga Taratuta, most of the other heroines of the Russian Revolution are of proletarian origin. Among them

LEAH GOTMAN and FANYA BARON⁴ are two anarchist women of outstanding personality. In their teens they left Russia for America, where they were employed in factories and took active part in the labor movement. I knew the girls well, splendid specimens of independent womanhood, of attractive appearance, fine feeling, and strong mentality. At the first call of the February Revolution these two girls, together with scores of other Russian refugees, hurried to their native land. It was just such as they that had helped to make the October Revolution. Leah and Fanya felt their place to be in the midst of the proletariat, preferring particularly to work with the Southern muzhik, among the agricultural elements of the Ukraine, to whom they gave all the love and devotion of their rich natures. Subsequently both girls carried on cultural activities among the rebel peasantry led by their famous Bat'ka ("Little Father") Nestor Makhno.

The hand of Kremlin, lifted against Makhno, fell heavily also upon Leah Gotman and Fanya Baron. Both were arrested on the eve of the Kharkov Conference, referred to above, and were sent to Butyrki Prison, where they fell victims to the Tcheka raid, on the night of April 25th, 1920. Torn out of her bed in the dead of night, Leah was dragged by her hair down a flight of stairs, and forced to remain for hours, half-dressed as she was, in the prison yard together with the other politicals, waiting to be transferred to some unknown destination. She has remained in prison ever since, being now one of the hapless inmates of the terrible Solovetsky Monastery, situated in the Arctic zone.

FANYA BARON, who always impressed me with her unbounded courage and exceptionally generous spirit, belongs to the rare type of woman who can perform the most difficult tasks of revolutionary ardor with calm grace and utter

⁴ Leah Gotman was born in 1896 in Kovel. Her date of death is unknown. Fanya Baron (1887–1921) was executed by the Cheka (or Tcheka), the first Soviet secret police.

the Left Social-Revolutionist Party, Maria wielded tremendous influence in the All-Russian Soviet of the peasantry, where she elaborated a comprehensive plan for the socialisation of the land, then the most vital problem of Russian life.

Already in 1918 Maria Spiridonova became aware that the Revolution was in greater danger from some of its alleged friends than from its enemies. She saw the growing autocracy of the Communist State and set herself sternly against it. The final break between her Party and the Bolsheviki came over the Brest Litovsk peace, which Spiridonova condemned for reasons of principle as well as practical grounds. Shortly after that she was arrested together with 500 delegates to the Peasant Congress.

When I came to Russia I was told by the Bolsheviki that Maria Spiridonova has suffered a nervous breakdown and that she was therefore placed in a sanatorium where she as receiving the best of care. But soon I discovered that Maria had escaped from "the best of care" and was living in Moscow disguised as a peasant, as she used to do in the days of the Tsar. Fortune presently favored me with the opportunity of spending several days with this extraordinary woman. I found not a trace of hysteria in her – in fact, her poise and mental balance and the objectivity of her recital of events since her return to Russia were most admirable.

A few months later, in the autumn of 1920, the Tcheka again became busy discovering conspiracies. During the numerous raids throughout Moscow they came upon Maria Spiridonova who lay ill with typhus. She was arrested and removed to the Ossoby Otdel – the Secret Section of the Tcheka. In 1921, when Maria was almost on the verge of death, the efforts of her friends succeeded in procuring her temporary release on condition of her returning to prison as soon as her health should improve. The only alternative was to let Maria die in prison of neglect, or give her back – improved in health – to the "best of care". In fact, no sooner did she begin to recuper-

tiful and cultured, young Maria left luxury and social position to devote herself to the cause of the oppressed. Fine-feeling and sympathetic, she could not bear without protest the injustice and tyranny she witnessed on every hand. At the age of 18 she committed an attentat [on] General Lukhanovsky, the Governor of Tambov Province, who was universally execrated for his truly Asiatic savagery toward the peasantry.

The Russian Tsars were never partial in their treatment of women politicals: they were equally relentless to all their opponents, be they men or women. But in the case of Maria Spiridonova the henchmen of Nikolas II. surpassed even the methods of Ivan the Terrible. Upon her arrest, Maria was beaten into insensibility, her clothes literally torn from her body, and the young girl then turned over to the drunken guard who amused themselves with burning her naked flesh with lighted cigarettes. After weeks on the verge of death, Maria was finally condemned to death.

The torture of Spiridonova aroused the entire Western world, whose protests saved her from the scaffold. She was "pardoned" to Siberia for life. The effects of her ghastly experience *left her with*⁶ injured lungs, a crippled hand, and the loss of the sight of one eye. But though physically marred and broken, her spirit remained aflame.

Few of the returned politicals received such popular ovation all the way from Siberia to Petrograd and Moscow as Maria Spiridonova upon her release from prison in 1917. But she would waste no time in the mere enjoyment of her newly won liberty. She threw herself into work with the whole ardour of her intense personality, organising the peasants, inspiring and directing the awakened energies of the Russian people. She became the adored leader of the great agrarian millions of Russia, the soul of all their age-long aspirations, and the spokesman of their needs and hopes. As the most outstanding figure of

⁶ handwritten correction to typescript

selflessness. Following the Butyrki raid she was transferred to Riazan Prison, whence she soon escaped, making her unaided way back to Moscow on foot. Arriving penniless and almost without clothes, her desperate condition compelled her to seek refuge with her husband's brother, at whose home she was discovered by the Tcheka. This big-hearted woman who had served the cause of the Revolution all her life was done to death by the Party that pretends to be the advance guard of the Revolution. Not content with murdering Fanya Baron (in September, 1921) the Communists put the stigma of "banditism" on the memory of their dead victim.

Not Anarchists only, but members of every other political group have had to pay heavy toll to the juggernaut of the Communist autocracy, including the Social-Revolutionists of the Right and of the Left, the Mensheviks, the Maximalists, and even the Communist[s] of the Left wing. I shall name but some of the most outstanding personalities.

EVGENIA RATNER, a young woman of keen mind and forceful character, joined the Social-Revolutionist Party soon after completing her medical studies in Switzerland. Her activities, after she returned to Russia, repeatedly involved her in difficulties with the authorities, who finally condemned her to a long prison term. Freed by the February Revolution of 1917, her exceptional ability and energy caused her to be elected as a member of the Central Committee of her Party, while she at the same time was chosen by the peasantry as one of their representatives in the Moscow Soviet. Her Party having been outlawed by the Bolsheviki, Evgenia was arrested in 1919, and placed on trial in 1922 together with eleven of her comrades, all of whom were condemned to death.

The intercession of the Western world, which aroused an emphatic international protest against the execution of the sentence – signed by such men as Anatole France, Romain Rolland and others – saved the lives of the twelve Social-Revolutionists,

Evgenia Ratner among them. She is now dragging out a miserable existence in the Butyrki Prison.

Of the Left Social-Revolutionists, Irena Kakhovskaia, Alexandra Izmailovitch, and Maria Spiridonova have suffered the greatest martyrdom. Kakhovskaya, grand-daughter of General Kakhovsky, the famous “Decembrist” rebel against Nicholas I. is a woman of recognised literary ability and revolutionary idealism. She began her work in the liberation movement of Russia when a very young girl, in 1904. Subsequently she was arrested and sentenced to 20 years’ *katorga*, from where she was later transferred to Akatuy, one of the most feared places of Tsarist exile. In 1914 she was permitted to settle in the Trans-Baikal territory, whence she was freed by the February, 1917, Revolution.

Upon her return from exile, Irena Kakhovskaia became one of the most valuable workers in the Left Social-Revolutionary Party, much esteemed for her understanding of the peasant psychology and the needs of the proletariat. After the Brest Litovsk peace and the German occupation of the Ukraine, the German authorities arrested Irena as a participant in the conspiracy against the life of General Eichorn, the Prussian Field Marshal in the Ukraine, who was killed by the Left Social-Revolutionist, A. Donskoy.⁵ Kakhovskaia was subjected to torture and sentenced to death. Fortunately for her, the outbreak of the revolution in Germany prevented her execution, and she was saved.

Irena continued in the work of her political convictions and in 1921 she was arrested again, this time by the Bolsheviks, by whom she was exiled to Kaluga, in Siberia.

While in prison, Irena Kakhovskaia wrote her most interesting memoirs, an unusual story of a very unique personality. Romain Rolland, after perusing the work said: “I am opposed to the ideas of Kakhovskaia, but her narrative has a captivat-

⁵ Boris Mikhailovich Donskoy (1894–1918)

ing human, or rather superhuman, quality. It is a psychological document of the highest value. The absolute simplicity of the narrator, her truly Russian ability of objective vision, her incredible energy devoted entirely to the cause she has at heart – all this aroused admiration in the reader, no matter what his attitude may be towards the value of the action accomplished or contemplated. What heroism, patience, utter self-abnegation, what treasures of the soul does not humanity waste on terrible and shameless purposes”.

Alexandra Izmailovitch, the daughter of a Russian Army General, is another instance of Russia’s young womanhood whom the Romanov autocracy has driven to individual acts of violence as the sole form of protest possible under the despotic regime. In 1906 she attempted the life of Governor Kurlov, of Minsk Province, who was responsible for most fiendish pogroms against Jews. Sentenced to Siberia for life, she was liberated with the other politicals in 1917. As a member of the Left Social-Revolutionary Party, she became a leading figure in the All-Russian Soviet of Peasant Deputies. When the Bolsheviks decided to “liquidate” her Party “for good”, in 1919, she was arrested together with a number of her comrades, remaining almost continuously in prison ever since.

The most characteristic feature of this exceedingly able and energetic woman is her life-long devotion to her friend and comrade Maria Spiridonova. They spent together eleven years in Siberia, together they returned to Russia to join their efforts in behalf of the people, and together they were arrested by the Bolshevik Government and are sharing their imprisonment these many years. It is no exaggeration to say that the tender care and devotion which Alexandra Izmailovitch has given to her friend are the main cause that Maria Spiridonova is still among the living.

MARIA SPIRIDONOVA is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable and heroic figures in the Russian revolutionary movement during the last twenty years. Of aristocratic family, beau-