

The Political Soviet Grinding Machine

Emma Goldman

December 9, 1936

Fifteen years have passed since comrade A Chapiro [Schapiro], my old pal Alexander Berkman, now gone from me, and myself came out of Soviet Russia to give to the thinking world the disclosures of the political grinding machine we found there. It was only after a long conflict that we decided to do so. For well we knew the price we will have to pay for speaking openly about the terrible political persecutions that was a daily affair in the so called Socialist Republic. The price we paid for our determination was high enough, but was nothing compared to the avalanche of abuse and vilification hurled against me, when my first ten articles about Soviet Russia appeared in the public press. Since I foresaw as much, I was not very shocked over the fact that my own comrades misunderstood what I had to say and the motive which induced me to appear in the NEW YORK WORLD. Much less did I care for the poison that oozed out against me from the Communists in Russia, America, and other countries.

Even while yet in Russia we protested against the grinding mill as we saw it in its sinister force. For myself I can say, and I can say the same for my comrade Alexander Berkman, we lost no opportunity to go from Bolshevist leader to leader; to plead for the unfortunate victims of the Cheka. Invariably we were told “wait till all our fronts are liquidated and you will see that the greatest political freedom will be established in Soviet Russia.” This assurance was repeated time on end so convincingly that we began to wonder whether we had understood the effect of Revolution on the rights of the individual as far as political opinion was concerned. We decided to wait. But weeks and months passed and there was no letup in the relentless extermination of all people who dared disagree even in the least with the methods of the Communist State. It was only after the massacre of Kronstadt, that we, our comrades Alexander Berkman and Alexander Chapiro [Schapiro] felt that we had no right to wait any longer, that it became imperative for us old revolutionists to cry the truth from the very housetops. Nevertheless we waited until the fronts were liquidated, though it was bitter hard to keep silent after 400 politicals were forcibly removed from the Boutirka prison and sent to remote places. When Fanny Baron and Tcherny [Lev Cherny] were murdered. At last the holy day arrived, the fronts were liquidated But the political grinding mill ground on, thousands being crushed by its wheels.

It was then that we came to the conclusion that the Soviet promise reiterated to us again and again, was like all promises coming from the Kremlin — an empty shell. We therefore came to the conclusion that we owed it to our suffering comrades, to all revolutionary political victims as well as to the workers and peasants of Russia, to go abroad and place our findings before the world.

From that time on and until 1930, comrade Berkman worked incessantly for the political prisoners and on raising funds to keep them alive in their dreadful living tomb. After that, comrade [Rudolf] Rocker, [Senya] Fleschin, Mollie Alperine [Steimer], Dobinski [Jacques Doubinsky] and many other faithful comrades kept up the work which our beloved Alexander was forced to discontinue. I can say that until this day the devoted efforts to bring our hapless comrades in Soviet Russia some cheer and a few comforts have never ceased, which merely goes to prove what devotion, love and solidarity can do.

In justice to the heads of the Soviet Government be it said that there was still a semblance of fair play while Lenin was alive. True, it was he who issued the slogan that Anarcho-syndicalists and Anarchists are but like the petit bourgeoisie, and that they should be exterminated. Nevertheless it is true that his political victims were sentenced for a definite period and were left with the hope that they would be set free when their sentence expired. Since the advent of Stalin, that bit of hope, hope so essential to people in prison for an idea, and so necessary for the continuation of their morale has been abolished.

Stalin, true to the meaning of his name, could not bear to think, that people given 5 or ten years, should be left with the expectation that they would one day see freedom again. Under his iron rule, people whose sentence expires are re-sentenced and shipped to another concentration camp. Thus we have today numerous comrades who have been shoved from exile to exile since 15 years. And there is no end in sight. But why should we be surprised at the relentless grinding mill Stalin has inaugurated for such opponents as Anarchists and Social Revolutionists? Stalin has proven that he is as cruel with his former comrades as with the rest who dare doubt his wisdom. The latest purge, quite equal to the purge of Hitler ([handwritten addition in margin] and the latest victim arrested and perhaps exiled, Zensl Muehsam) should prove to all who are still capable of thinking, that Stalin is determined to exterminate everybody who has looked into his cards. We need not hope, therefore, that our Anarchist comrades or any of the Left wing Revolutionaries will be spared.

I am writing this from Barcelona, the seat of the Spanish Revolution. If ever I believed, even for a moment in the explanation of Soviet leaders that political freedom is impossible during a revolutionary period, my stay in Spain has completely cured me of it! Spain too is in the clutches of a blood stained civil war, she is surrounded by enemies within and without. No, not merely by fascist enemies. But by all sorts of social exponents, who are more bitterly opposed to Anarcho-syndicalism and Anarchism under the name of CNT and FAI, than they are to fascism. Yet in spite of the danger lurking in every corner of every city, to the Spanish Revolution, inspite of the imperative necessity to concentrate all the forces on winning the antifascist war, it is yet amazing to find more political freedom than ever was dreamt of by Lenin and his comrades.

If anything, the CNT-FAI, the most powerful party in Catalonia, is going to the opposite extreme. Republicans, socialists, Communists, Trotzists, in fact everybody daily marches through the streets heavily armed and their banners flying. They have taken possession of the most elaborate houses of the former bourgeoisie. They merrily publish their papers and hold huge meetings, Yet the CNT-FAI has never once even suggested that their allies are taking too much advantage of the tolerance of the Anarchists in Catalonia. In other words our comrades are demonstrating that they would rather prefer to give their associates the same right to liberty as they take for themselves than to establish a dictatorship and a political grinding machine that would crush all their opponents.

Yes, 15 years have passed. According to the glad tidings from Russia one hears over the Radio, in the Communist press and on every occasion: "Life is joyful and splendid" in the Socialist Republic. Did not Stalin issue this slogan and has it not been reechoed over and over again. "Life is joyful and splendid". Not for the tens of thousands of political victims in prison and in concentration camps. Anarchists, Socialists, Communists, Intellectuals, masses of the workers and tens of thousands of the peasantry know nothing of the new joy and splendour proclaimed by the Torquemada on the Communist throne. Their lives, if they are still alive, continues hopeless, drab, a daily purgatory without end.

The more reason for us, comrades, and for all who are sincere Libertarians, to continue the work for the political prisoners in the Soviet Union. I do not appeal to the Libertarians who shout themselves hoarse against fascism or against the political abuses in their own countries and yet remain silent in the face of the continued persecution and extermination of true Revolutionaries in Russia. Their senses have become blunted. They therefore do not hear the voice that rises to the very heavens from the hearts and the stifled throats of the victims of the political grinding machine. They do not realise that their silence is a sign of consent, and that they are therefore responsible for Stalins acts. They are a hopeless lot. But the Libertarians, who oppose every dictatorship and fascism, no matter under what flag, they must continue to rouse human interest and sympathy in the tragic fate of the political prisoners in Russia.

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