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Aida Basevich

Marcelline Hutton

2015

Some Anarchist young women like Aida Basevich initially wanted to join the Komsomol, but when she witnessed the violence of the anti-religious agitation, she changed her mind. The robbery of St. Vladimir Church in Petrograd in 1923 angered her.¹ Other Anarchists and Social Revolutionaries became similarly disenchanted, were arrested and imprisoned for their political views in the 1920s. SR Anna Skripnikova (1896–1974) was arrested when one of her friends offended the Soviets. She was imprisoned in 1918, and again in 1925, and 1927. When she tried to protest some of the brutal behavior of the guards, a gaoler told her:

Forget these Russian intellectual habits of protesting in prison, they are old fashioned and worth nothing today! Take care only of yourself, otherwise you will fare badly under Soviet power!²

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Excerpted from *Resilient Russian Women in the 1920s & 1930s*
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¹ Aida Basevich, “How I Became an Anarchist,” in Shapovalov, *Remembering the Darkness*, 129.

² Anna P. Skripnikova, “Why Weren’t You Crying?” in *Remembering the Darkness*, 79.

The Soviets used provocateurs to trap people and arrest them in the 1920s, and some women were duped into becoming spies. Still, deals with Soviet guards could be made. In some ways the Bolshevik prison system was more “humane” than during the purges of the 1930s. When the anarchist Peter Kropotkin died in 1921, imprisoned anarchists were let out of jail to attend his funeral. Indeed, the memoirs of anarchist Aida Basevich (1905–1995) show a lax political police. She noted that during mass arrests when student anarchists were being arrested, some simply ran away and evaded the police. She observed:

At that time everything was different, the screws were not turned so tightly, and the regime in the prison was different. We managed to learn the day and the time when they would be transported... There were thirty-eight people in this case. Maybe they had arrested more, but by the time of the trial there were thirty-eight of us. The GPU let all the rest go, because many had connections and then it was still possible, the GPU was a different organization back then... Political prisoners enjoyed special treatment, different from that given common criminals. First of all, by the rules, we could not be housed together with common criminals, although they had already started doing this... Usually my parents brought me very good parcels, and I shared them with all my cell mates... Political prisoners still received better food and had special rights with regard to the lights—we were allowed to keep the lights on longer. We were taken on “normal” walks—all cell mates together... Cell-to-cell visits also had been allowed... We announced hunger strikes to have visitation rights; for example, to have a visitation

before a prisoner's transport. Our hunger strike was very short. We fought for everything; we did not give an inch. From the outside I received so many letters expressing moral support! I was simply flooded by these letters. Financially I was well off. Lida Chukovskaia did so much for me: She kept sending letters and parcels.

When I was in Shpalernaia, my parents came to visit me. Generally, I was given better treatment than other prisoners because a number of scholars had issued petitions on behalf of our group... On Jewish holidays the Jewish community of the city always brought parcels to Jewish prisoners, both political and common criminals. The same was true in Samara.³

Roza Vetukhnovskaia (1904–1993) belonged to the Socialist Revolutionary Party in the 1920s, and she too was arrested in 1924. She spent three years in camps and two years in exile. Indeed, she spent much of the 1930s in exile and was rearrested during World War II, as many others were.⁴

Not all women arrested for “political crimes” in the 1920s fared as well as anarchist Basevich. A more somber note appears in the autobiography of Evgeniia Iaroslavskaia Markon (1902–1931). She had led the life of a pampered and protected daughter of the intelligentsia before the revolution. A convinced revolutionary before the Bolsheviks took over, Markon soon became disillusioned. In 1922 she graduated from Petrograd University but was tired of studying. She wanted to fall in love and marry and did so after meeting the poet Aleksandr Iaroslavsky. While they lectured against religion in Russia in the early 1920s, they soon found the

³ Basevich, “How I Became an Anarchist,” in *Remembering the Darkness*, 134–37.

⁴ Shapovalov, *Remembering the Darkness*, 147.

regime oppressive. Living abroad in Berlin and Paris in the mid-1920s, they wrote some articles critical of the Soviet regime. Yet they decided to return even though they thought they would be killed upon their return.

After her husband was arrested in 1928, Markon sold newspapers in Leningrad and Moscow to support herself. With a university diploma, she could have taken a job in a Soviet office, but she despised the “clean, self-assured, and inaccessible” Soviet office. She “could not even think of going to work in such a nest of scribes and pharisees!” Moreover, taking parcels to and visiting her husband in prison was time consuming and not congruent with a regular job. Markon had a strong antisocial streak, and she preferred selling newspapers and petty thievery to office work. Once, she sold out of papers easily when the news was of a bomb thrown at an OGPU office. She described this event in her memoirs, which she wrote in prison, and which were kept in a police file for decades after she was executed in 1931:

So I stood on Nevsky Prospect, and when someone passed by, I would say distinctly and loudly, looking aside, “A bomb in Moscow OGPU! *Vechniaia krasnaia gazeta!* A bomb in Moscow OGPU!” A passerby would stop as if he had been whacked on the head. With trembling hands, he would take out his wallet and open the newspaper. It was like a birthday present to everybody—who in Soviet Russia did not hate the GPU?⁵

Like many other Russian women, Markon moved from Moscow to Leningrad to be near her husband while he was being investigated. After he was sentenced to serve in the north, in Solovetsky, she also visited him there. Since she

⁵ Evgeniia I. Iaroslavskaiia-Markon, “My Autobiography,” in *Remembering the Darkness*, 42–43.

hated the Soviet regime, she resorted to petty thievery to survive, and she was arrested several times before being sentenced to three years in exile. In prison, Markon struck a guard, and she was sentenced to execution by firing squad. She wrote her autobiography while imprisoned, and it was kept in her file until the fall of the former Soviet Union. One report in her file mentioned her agitating among the prisoners, calling for a work stoppage and an uprising against Soviet power. The report also mentioned that Markon believed that Soviet power discredited the idea of revolution, covering itself up with the name of the Soviets. She thought the country was governed by a clique of the intelligentsia headed by the Central Committee of the CPSU. Another guard wrote of her defiance and how she even spat in the face of her executioner.⁶

⁶ Markon, “My Autobiography,” and files about her case in Shapovalov, *Remembering the Darkness*, 59, 63.