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A Memorial Tribute to Vsevolod Eikhenbaum Voline

Mollie Steimer

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1945

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(The Antifascist). However, when the Libertarian Movement and the CNT decided to participate in the government, he lost no time in submitting his resignation and expressed his categorical opinion that he judged the step to be a grave error. Result: he was jobless and had no journal.

Voline had such a fruitful, dramatic intense and varied life that we feel very bad to be giving it such light treatment. Voline deserves much better. However, we have our limitations, and we will give a final touch to this sketch.

He never lost his faith and enthusiasm, not even in his darkest days, his greatest poverty or danger. In May, 1945, when he was very sick after five years of hunger and cold, completely exhausted physically, he wrote to us of his plans to publish. He said in his letter:

“I don’t need anything special. I would appreciate it if you would send me a fountain pen because I have been unable to write for lack of one. It would be very good if you could send me a monthly contribution for the anarchist publication I have in mind.”

This was his last letter to us. Then we received the shocking news of his death.

That is all. We have lost one of the best and purest idealists our movement ever had. He was a courageous revolutionist and anarchist without reservations or qualifications, and a great friend and comrade of all of us who had the good fortune to know him and to work with him.

Mollie Steimer
Estudios Sociales (Social Studies), October 15, 1945,
Mexico, D.F. (Memorial Tribute)

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relate their personal experience to the history they are writing if they had participated in it. Otherwise they run the risk of leaving things in shadow, or worse, of corrupting the essential base, the throbbing spirit of events in such a way as to seriously mislead the reader and the future historian. It is true that the personal experience is also not free from inaccuracies and equivocation. However, this is not very important. The essential thing is to give a real, live, substantive account of events. It will be relatively simple to root out secondary errors by juxtaposing accounts of actual personal experience with documents and other data. The story of a participant, the visual witness of events, has a special value. The deeper and more complete the personal experience, the greater the value of the history that is written. If, in addition, the participant is in possession of a great deal of documentation and the testimony of other participants, his report acquires a significance of the first order.”

Do not these lines have the value of a treatise on history? Don't they stir you to want to read his Unknown Revolution?

Another characteristic story

At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Voline placed himself on the side of the people in arms. The Libertarian Movement and the CNT (National Confederation of Labor, the anarcho-syndicalist trade union organization in Spain) immediately offered him the editorship of the journal to be published in Paris. Voline had a good position and received a good salary. It is enough to say that he stopped his own writing and devoted all his efforts to publishing *El Antifascista*

We urged him to come with us to Mexico. His reply was: “That will be too far from home. Whatever will happen in a revolutionary sense will take place in Europe. I must remain here.”

We never suspected that this would be our last separation. Voline’s physical and moral resistance, his iron will and unbreakable firmness, made us feel that he could defy eternity.

Aspects of Voline’s Character

We reproduce the following paragraph from his prologue to the History of the Makhno Movement, a section of The Unknown Revolution. It is a treatise of beauty, of good sense and outstanding historiography:

“The epic poem of Makhno is too grave, too sublime and tragic; it has been too strongly irrigated with the blood of its participants; it is much too profound, complicated and original to permit it to be treated lightly, as though it amounted to no more than the contradictory stories and testimony of different individuals. We do not propose to limit ourselves to documents only, because documents are dead things that do not reflect throbbing life fully. Future historians who have no access to other materials will have to work with documents only. Contemporaries must be much more demanding and critical in their work and their personal relationship to it, because history will judge them accordingly. They must refrain from passing along stories and expressing opinions about facts of great importance if they did not take part in them personally. They must not be seduced by tales and documents to make history. They should rather make an effort to

There is a stirring, pure quality in the lives of the great Russian revolutionary figures, such as Kropotkin, Perovskaya and others, that fills one with love and respect. The very fact of voluntarily giving up a life of ease, of comfort and pleasure, to take up a hazardous and difficult life is itself a mark of high moral quality. To leave such a life of ease for one of unending hard struggle and sacrifice in defense of a higher conception of justice, this is the mark of a real personality, of a superior human being. Vsevolod Eikhenbaum (Voline) was such a man.

If such an attitude is not just for show or misrepresentation but represents profound feelings; if one undergoes most terrible trials in behalf of the liberation of the most oppressed class; if one suffers deportation, torment and misfortune without the slightest weakening of commitment; if in the most difficult situations and greatest dangers the individual maintains his convictions and his desire to continue the struggle; if the dark octopus of misery pervades his home for his six children and his comrade who suffered a sad death, and he does not weaken in the defense of his ideals, of remaining always in the front lines, of never abandoning the struggle until death stopped his heart and closed his eyes, one can only say that this is the sublime in the purest meaning of the word. This was Voline’s life.

How do such rare individuals come about? Difficult to say. They cannot be understood by studying the average human being. They live separate, exceptional lives for whom the passions and desires of the majority, their aims and interests and concerns are a matter of indifference. One must regard such a person from two points of view to understand him: the intimate, internal viewpoint, and the external. The first tells us something of his psychology, his sensibility, his passions, his sentiments; the other shows us his response to the world around him, the social scene, the human suffering, the universal injustice, the ceaseless misfortune of the working class. Both aspects are joined in the individual, creating the personality of the fighter, the revolutionist. In Voline’s case we had an uncon-

querable spirit, great emotional drive, deep love for mankind, a powerful desire to overcome, an inexhaustible readiness to do battle. All this at the service of the eternal cause symbolized by Prometheus in his combat against titans and gods in defense of freedom for mankind. This was the course taken voluntarily by Voline. His fruitful life compares with the lives of the most dedicated, pure fighters in the international revolutionary movement of all epochs and all countries.

Voline's Background

Vsevolod Eikhenbaum Voline was born in Voronezh, Russia, in August, 1882. His father and mother were both doctors who enjoyed a comfortable life. The celebrated mathematician and poet, Eikhenbaum, was his grandfather, and Boris Eikhenbaum, the great Russian literary critic, his only brother.

Vsevolod graduated from college in Voronezh and entered the University of St. Petersburg. He did brilliantly in his studies, but as he progressed he became less interested in the profession he had chosen because it could not help the suffering of the Russian people. He abandoned his studies when he had almost completed his course to become a lawyer. His parents pleaded with him desperately, but his decision was irrevocable: he broke with them and joined the Socialist Revolutionary Party.

His greatest desire was to lift the people to a higher standard of living and culture. He organized workers and peasants clubs, and gave them all his time and energy. He developed libraries, organized schools and created a special program of adult education to achieve these aims.

One of his outstanding activities was direct, personal propaganda. He gave hundreds of lectures, edited periodicals, published hundreds of leaflets. When he was told that he ought to write something important such as a book, he would answer

“The destructive course of the governing system began in 1914 when the First World War started. This destructive period can last for decades; each new war will be worse and more terrible than the one before. It is, and will be like this, because the privileged classes will spend greater and greater force to protect their privileges. Therefore, however critical the situation, the constructive forces of the new society must have nothing to do with such wars other than to go on preparing the masses by pointing out the great changes that must be made in society: to prepare them for the social revolution, to show that the riches of the earth should be organized for the benefit of all humanity, to point the way to create a saner, better world.”

This was why he felt that he had no stake in the Second World War.

Such a position was extremely difficult for a foreigner to maintain, as can be easily imagined. He experienced a great deal of hate. He was persecuted relentlessly by the police. He could find no work, had no home, and frequently had nothing to eat. However, at these times of poverty, Voline would take advantage of the forced idleness by staying in a library and writing his “History of the Russian Revolution” (later published as *The Unknown Revolution*).

By luck, before leaving France for Mexico, we, my comrade Senya and myself, stayed in Marseilles for a short time and shared our rations with Voline. He read his manuscript, “History of the Russian Revolution”, to us. It is a well-written work and a most interesting document. He was happy that he had been able to finish it. He believed that this work would inform the public of the many activities and sacrifices of the Anarchists in support of the Russian Revolution.

and conditions were accepted and signed by both parties. He organized the Congress together with other comrades. The Congress started. However, the second Bolshevik treachery occurred immediately. The permission to hold the Congress was nothing but a gross lie. As soon as the counter-revolutionary movement was crushed, everyone who took part in the anarchist Congress, including Voline, was arrested. He was again taken to a prison in Moscow where he declared a hunger strike together with other comrades.

Shortly thereafter, an International Congress of the Profintern (the Communist organized Red Trade Union International) was held in Moscow. Some of the foreign delegates, especially the anarcho-syndicalists, protested against the persecution of indisputable revolutionists such as Voline and other jailed comrades. Thanks to their intervention, they were released from prison and expelled from Russia, their country.

Voline's Return to France

After his expulsion he settled in Berlin. He continued his lifelong work there. He edited the Anarkhichesky (Anarchist Herald), and published a great number of articles in the libertarian press. However, his economic situation was bad. Some of the comrades believed that he would do better in France. He received permission to return to France in 1925.

After he was settled in Paris, he resumed publication of Anarkhichesky, collaborated with a number of French publications, gave lectures and did whatever he could in behalf of the movement and comrades who needed his support.

When the Second World War broke out he found himself in Marseilles. He refused to become involved in capitalist wars. He had a personal theory for this position. This was his reasoning:

that the daily struggle required first attention, and that when he had passed the age of seventy he would dedicate himself to write something serious.

He never wanted to accept money from his parents, earning his living by tutoring. His attitude on this was made entirely clear when he refused to accept the inheritance of a large sum of money willed to him by his parents upon their death. He gave the entire sum to the movement to be used for the revolutionary struggle. Long heated discussions with a number of his comrades failed to change his mind. His unswerving response was, "It is not mine. It does not belong to me."

However, someone who knew the difficult situation in which Voline's family lived managed to give seven thousand rubles to his wife which was received in their bare home like water in a time of drought.

His Militance in the Movement

He was an active militant in the revolutionary movement for many long years. His activity and dynamism knew no respite. He forgot to take care of his most elemental needs in the fever of his struggles. He could never say no to the demands of the movement. Friends, family, situation, jobs, all were put aside to fulfil the assignment given to him.

He participated actively in the revolutionary movement of 1905. He was one of the organizers, and a member of the Soviet of Workers and Peasants. That same year, while taking part in the revolt at Kronstadt, he was arrested and imprisoned in the Peter and Paul fortress. Thanks to the influence and efforts of his family, the prison sentence was commuted and he was sent into exile to the faraway inhospitable regions of Siberia. He succeeded in escaping to France after a series of incidents.

During his stay in France, undoubtedly due to his various experiences, he reached the conclusion that the State could

never give freedom and well being to the people. He declared himself an anarchist. From that time on, he devoted all his enthusiasm and knowledge to this movement which he loved and worked for the rest of his life.

This evolution is understandable in view of his temperament and sensibility. He detested the social conventions and fought against them; he could not tolerate the slightest injustice; when Voline spoke of the people he did not confine himself to unfeeling artificial slogans; he loved the people; he loved the suffering masses who earn their bread by the sweat of their brow. Like Pushkin, Nekrasov, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, etc., he loved the Russian people tenderly and fought for their liberation. The people were number one among his loves, his concerns, his hopes.

When the First World War broke out, he spoke out against it and was expelled from France. He succeeded in reaching the United States with great difficulty where he became active with the Russian anarcho-syndicalists, helping with their journals, giving lectures, holding meetings. But he did not remain there long. As soon as the Russian Revolution broke out in 1917 » he was among the first to return to his country. Together with other comrades he lost no time organizing the Union for Anarcho-Syndicalist Propaganda. He developed an extraordinary activity at this time. He edited the *Golos Truda* (Voice of Labor), carried on an intense propaganda campaign, took an active part in revolutionary activities. In a word, he lived the October Revolution.

He was bitterly opposed to the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, and fought against the Bolshevik position. The anarchist movement protested against the Treaty, and called upon the people to fight against the Austro-German invasion of the Ukraine and White Russia. When Voline finished editing this manifesto, he resigned as editor of the paper, declaring, "When I call upon the masses to fight, I must march with them." And he went to the front.

Voline and the Makhno Movement

Several months after his departure, the comrades asked him to return to organize the Ukrainian Confederation of NABAT (Tocsin). The aim of this movement was to bring together the various tendencies among the anarchists, to form a fighting, creative organization. He returned without delay and placed himself on the front lines of NABAT, dedicating himself once again most actively to propaganda. During this period the counter-revolution gained great strength in the Ukraine, and the peasant army led by Makhno fought desperately against the reaction. A Congress of the Confederation was held in Elizabethgrad at that time, and Voline was there. When he and a group of comrades were returning from the meeting they were seized by a counter-revolutionary band. They were about to be executed when Makhno's army arrived and rescued them. Although they knew about Voline, this was the first time he had established contact with the fighters, the peasant army.

He immediately saw the courage and the idealism in the Makhno movement. He joined them, and did everything he could to educate them and make them worthy of the ideal they represented, worthy of their comrades in struggle. He was an active fighter against the Denikin bands. As soon as the counter-revolutionary forces were exterminated, the Bolsheviks proceeded to arrest the most active people in the Makhno movement, among them Voline. He was condemned to death by the Bolsheviks. However, thanks to the intervention of some old immigrants who were members of the Russian government, Lenin ordered that he not be executed.

Voline was taken to prison in Moscow where he remained until Nestor Makhno made an agreement with the Bolsheviks for a joint struggle against the white armies of Wrangel, on condition that Voline and his comrades be released from prison and given permission to hold a Congress of Russian anarchists in Kharkiv. Voline was released after the terms