

What I Witnessed in Russia

Nicholas Lazarevitch

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Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
TO THE LIÈGE MECHANICS' UNION	4

INTRODUCTION

As the motto for his splendid book on the Paris Commune, Lissagaray penned the following words: "That it be made known."

In publishing this pamphlet today we too are trying to shed a little light on the situation trade unionists have had to confront in Russia due to the revolutions of March and November 1917 and the Communist Party's dictatorship.

There has been no dearth of documents of all sorts over the ten years that have elapsed. One by one, celebrated journalists, politicians and authors have provided us with, here a book, there a pamphlet. But each of them was a visitor to Russia in a clearly defined capacity. Some, ferocious enemies of the revolution, fearful lest one that might damage their interests might erupt in their own countries refused to see anything in the land of the soviets other than bloodthirsty criminals with ghastly habits and abominable practices. Which of us had not heard tell of women raffled off, bourgeois hacked to pieces and knives held between the teeth?

Others, discovering in the soviet regime confirmation of their authoritarian collectivist aspirations, saw everything as perfectly fine and rosy. To them, the real motive, or rather pretext was primarily to rescue the Russian revolution. To that end all means were permitted and everything justified: celebrating the jailing of those opposed to the dictatorship; the banishment of libertarian revolutionaries was seen as necessary; deportations to the islands in the White Sea were viewed as understandable. They systematically denied anything that challenged the legend of the "Promised Land" that they claimed to have rediscovered and they countered the "red hell" tales of the former with tales of a "Russian paradise" that has become the stuff of legend, but which has, regrettably, remained precisely that.

Today a happy turn of events offers us the opportunity to present a summation of Russia with the utmost confidence of truthfulness. The notes that follow are not the handiwork of some horrified bourgeois, nor of some unrepentant Bolshevik.

Bringing to prior assumptions to the table, comrade Nicolas Lazarévitch, an ex-member of the Mechanics' Union, who returned to Russia at the time of the revolution, offers not a single detail that he has not experienced at first hand. He had set course for the revolution as if sailing into the dawn. He knew that in our lousy society the bourgeois governments were in coalition with one another to cut off the road to Freedom. He was ready for the suffering in order to help build a better world. He believed in the Revolution.

Unfortunately, events left him cruelly disappointed. In the wake of the horrific famine that decimated Russia, he attempted to defend his bread and his freedom from the rapaciousness of the Nepmen and the dogmatism of the intellectual leadership. Instinctively sociable, he sought to join with his brothers in order to assert their right to life. As a class trade unionist, he attempted by word of mouth and by example to revive the instrument of struggle that is the trade union and to make a reality of control of the factories being in the hands of the producers. But, from the very outset of his endeavours to regenerate the unions, he was confronted by a redouble machinery of repression in no way inferior to that of the reactionary governments the world over.

Determined that his ideal would triumph, a looking to the banding together of producers as the best way of building a new age, he carried on with his work on behalf of truth and justice. After that, his fate was sealed. Police, imprisonment, beatings, secret trials, slander and eventually expulsion – all of these were deployed to stop Lazarévitch from achieving his purpose: a union for trade unionists and not for the politicians.

In a country that brags about being free, under the aegis of the dictatorship of the proletariat, in the name of defending the revolution, a libertarian worker who dared to work to form independent trade unions was stymied. The “GPU”, the red judges and red gaolers all strove to stifle a voice that had spoken out and which might prove the overture to a formidable movement capable of rattling the new order. What! Some poor devil of a working man daring to speak of a right to life, a right to speak, of doing away with Piece-rates and of workers’ control? It might have been overlooked had he been an intellectual: wolves do not turn on one another. Lazarévitch was dispatched to the places where well-intentioned fact-finders and smug potentates do and never will go.

Ah! Those lovely tales of model prisons!

And the sweet myths about holidays for detainees!

But now light is being shed on everything and we can see that it was all fibs. The proletariat is odiously exploited in Russia. The Nepmen have replaced the capitalists. In Russia, those who protest are jailed. In Russia, the working-class groans beneath the yoke. The only thing that has changed has been the name: the shortcomings endure. True, there has been a thoroughgoing change, an enforced change, brought about by the enormous suffering of the muzhiks and the workers. And there is no question but that the Russian people stands ready to defend the few freedoms that it has earned with its blood against any bourgeois coalition. But, having escaped from the clutches of tsarism, it need not fall into the mailed fists of the Marxist experimenters. Men driven by a higher idea, trade unionists and libertarians should not be jailed, deported or executed in the land of the soviets.

Let the producer, having overthrown all dominion, take up his proper place in the sun and , by means of labour intervention in the factories, topple this new foe: “The dictatorship over the proletariat.”

Jean Ledoux

N.B. A special note should be made that comrade Lazarévitch was never set free. Having refused to compromise his principles , since jail had made no inroads into his moral fibre and since he was as determined as ever to carry on as before and struggle through his union, he was, in the end, expelled

TO THE LIÈGE MECHANICS’ UNION

Dear comrades:

Whilst in the Butyrki prison in Moscow (Russia) I learned very vaguely that your organization had protested to the Russian government about my imprisonment.

Despite the lack of detail in this news, it nevertheless and very often afforded me the courage that I needed, and I remembered that I owed a duty to the Very first trade union organization to which I ever belonged, and was obliged, it seems to me, to refuse to have any truck with the whole hypocrisy surrounding the charge that was hanging over me and that, some many years on, a hand was being reached out to me through the bars. Thank you, comrades.

But now I need to ask something more of you. Would you be willing to help me state in public the truth as to the situation that confronts class trade unionists in Russia?

You will find enclosed a copy of a letter that I wrote to the union paper of the Syndicat Unique du Bâtiment (Amalgamated Constuction Union) in Paris; I am afraid that lack of space may prevent their publishing it.

Should you find the contents of that letter interesting enough, could you not publish it?

For myself, I would rather it was published in trade union papers, or by the anarchist press, but I would ask you on no account to forward it to the socialist press.

Be so kind as to let me have your response on this matter, at the address I have included.

I offer you, in all friendship, my worker's greetings.

N. Lazarévitch

19 November 1926

Dear comrades:

Allow me to provide your newspaper with a few details of the group of which I was a member; I reckon the best place to do so is in a trade union paper, since they will be alive to certain little-known aspects of the union question in Russia.

Before making the following reports public, I hesitated, since, for quite some time now, I have noted that all criticism of the current regime in Russia is immediately seized upon by reactionaries of every persuasion and more especially by the socialists.

Therefore, before broaching the crux of the matter, I ought to say that all the shortcomings of the current Russian regime, no matter how obvious, do not prevent us from foreseeing that the advent of a bourgeois restoration in this country, whether in the form of a monarchy or a democratic republic, would deal a severe blow to the workers' movement in general and to the Russian one in particular. Russian workers know, from experience, that they have ousted the regimes of Kerensky, the Constituent Assembly rule, rule by Denikin, Koltchak, etc., and that any restoration would, as far as they are concerned, be synonymous with a wave of White terror, or, to speak more bluntly, a huge massacre of proletarians; so that, whilst entertaining no illusions as to the proletarian character of the Russian government, they will side with the governing class at the first move by the bourgeoisie, whether this take the form of a movement inside the country or a declaration of war.

That said, lest the hypocritical followers of Noske be allowed to have their crimes forgotten by posing as champions of the Russian working class, by my reckoning it is no less necessary, for the sake of workers everywhere, that we understand the real nature of the current Russian government. A few painful truths discovered in time will allow workers elsewhere to keep a weather eye out in future so that they do not let the fruits of their endeavours be snatched away from them by a new class of intellectuals guilefully purporting to be the workers' movement's allies; besides, the consequences of the absence of workers' control in Russia could be resolutely resisted, starting right now, not merely by those of us who are opposed to the state in any form, but also by sincere communist workers who, deeming a period of transition into a proletarian state necessary actually wish to see it run by the working class itself.

Up until 1921, the boldest of the Russian intellectuals, banded together in the RCP, or in support of it, knowing the importance of the role accorded them by the expansion of modern technology, saw no chance of gaining and retaining power other than by allying itself with the proletariat, arguing that the latter's wishes had been expressed and realized. They divined in it a

strength that was not only capable of overthrowing the bourgeoisie but also of turning against themselves, if they plainly opposed the proletarians' struggle for possession of the factories.

But once civil war and famine weakened the working class, the intellectuals thought that they might be able to harness its strength; and they no longer made any bones about their intention of clinging to power; not just in defiance of the bourgeoisie, but also in defiance of the proletariat too, and they discarded their socialist mask and moved directly to the "NEP".

That was in late 1921 or early 1922. We witnessed the re-establishment of economic inequality: whereas in the working-class districts there was a slow return to a few opportunities to survive on a crust of black bread, a handful of rich folk wallowed in the rebirth of luxury. On closer inspection, we can identify them not just as businessmen happy because the State was tolerating their thievery, but also those who were running the State factories – we used to laughingly refer to them as "our factories" – those who were preaching to us about our patiently enduring our painful living conditions; those who used to console us when, for weeks and months at a time, we would be waiting in vain for our wages, telling us that such sacrifices were being made so that, once hard times had passed, we might organize our lives for ourselves. As soon as those factories generate any profits, most of them were gobbled up by the technicians on high wages that were being lawfully and officially increased because, so they said, their work was more valuable than ours.

Faced with that situation, the workers made ready to fight, not for their well-being, but in order to ease their misery; the leaders realized that and, in order to direct that resistance, they awarded a brand-new role to the Unions, formally announcing that they were going to revert to their old role of championing the workers' economic interests. The fact is that, since then, having seen the close union that there was between the trade union officials, the factory managers and high-ranking Party members, we query the outcome of such trade union activity, subjected as it is, entirely to the governing political party, which is to say, effectively, to the same ruling class of technicians. But we were aware of the harmful consequences of any split inside the Trade Unions and we strove to reset those organizations by working from within them, playing an active part in the workshop meetings. The mistrust among the working classes, aggravated by their being physiologically weakened, was huge: the workshop meetings were sparsely attended, often because they were unable to go ahead because the factory gates had been shut and the staff could not gain entry; and one had to speak up in the knowledge that every word might be reported to the secret police which is entitled to jail or banish without trial; whether to the soviets or to the factory committees, elections were conducted, and still are, by means of open voting, so that the management and the party cell know who votes this way or that; everything conspired to crush the proletariat's interest in such meetings. In such conditions, it was necessary to call for confidence in the Trade Unions so that they might be changed and turned into authentic class defence organs.

Let me explain my personal experience in this regard since that way I can stand over every detail.

The first time I spoke up at the Dynamo plant was with regard to the election of a deputy to the district soviet. The only time it occurred to him to make contact with his electors was at a meeting prior to the fresh elections, in which he was seeking re-election. When I argued that the point of the soviets was precisely that their members, ahead of any important discussion, should consult with those who had delegated them and keep them regularly briefed in detail on what

their delegates were doing, the communists responded by telling me that I was a naïve hothead lobbying on behalf of unfeasible things.

Next up was a meeting regarding the Central Committee of the SRs; I expressed the view that the matter was nothing more than a squabble between intellectuals; since the SRs were too cowardly to seize power, they preferred to see the bourgeoisie ensconced there, as long as it would let them have the occasional well-paid appointment; the intellectual communists, being more sure of themselves, were hoping to govern over the heads of the bourgeoisie whilst simultaneously exploiting the proletariat for the benefit of their own caste. I was dismissed as a Menshevik and the chairman of the Factory Committee moved that I be banned from saying anything more: the meeting did not fall into line behind him there.

In the end a meeting was held to determine my fate within the plant; up until then, membership of the Union had been automatic; every worker entering the plant was enlisted as a member, without his even being issued with a union card; dues were deducted from his wages at the end of every month and no unionized worker ever set eyes on the Union, other than on grand, solemn occasions: since the outset of the "NEP", in order to be able to stem any inkling of economic resistance and as one of the consequences of the abandonment of the fight for a new order, the Party saw fit to arrange a sham of voluntary Union membership; it intended to hold special meetings to that end; if two thirds of the meeting, voting by a raising of hands, supported the granting of membership, it was taken that the entire workforce was unionized; as before, the union membership cards stayed in the factory offices and the union dues carried on being deducted by the plant management. Instead of that, I suggested this new arrangement, according to which those dues payments would have been collected by workshop delegates; that way, the union members would have the opportunity of frequent contact with the organization and of making their demands known to it.

A few weeks later, that suggestion was used as a pretext for removing me from the workshop: the chair of the Factory Committee interpreted it as outright opposition to the Union on my part and he moved and got the Regional Committee to agree, without consultation with the workshop employees, that I should be kicked out of the organization; then he had the management fire me as a non-unionized worker; only after some heated arguments did they have me back my card; when I tackled him in the manager's office regarding my being re-hired, he warned me, in a friendly way, that, speaking for himself, he would have loved to see me jailed a long time ago, but the rest of the Factory Committee members had opted instead to have the management fire me and for me to have the opportunity to work elsewhere and "to ensure thereby that the situation at Dynamo was not as bad as it might be." Those are the very words he used.

Things having come to that pass as a result of activity that was above board and lawful, I found myself obliged to resort to more surreptitious approach, making a personal effort to ensure that, wherever I was working, the workers, supportive of a clear cut stand in defence of their rights, and more especially of doing away with delays in the payment of wages and obtaining better protection against work accidents, would meet frequently with one another, get to know one another and participate in greater numbers in the workshop meetings.

In the spring of 1924, in Moscow, I bumped into a number of comrades who, knowing that I could sometimes come by copies of *Le Libertaire* or *Der Syndikalist*, would regularly ask me to

translate from them; in order to avoid falling foul of the secret administrative courts, we used to get together in the countryside on the outskirts of the city to read those newspapers.; We were just manual workers and very soon issues relating to workshop life drove us to look into the trade union issue; in order to gauge the state of the trade unions, suffice to say that , a few months later, after a number of spontaneous incidents of economic unrest, on the part of the toiling masses, the Party had to launch the watchword Revive the trade unions; At the time I am speaking of, these had been utterly discredited in the eyes of the workers who could see the union officials forever grovelling in front of the factory and trust managements; this was apparent every day in the lives of the Factory Committees and in their overall conclusions – such as the drive for increased productivity levels.

Our group reckoned that person-to-person propaganda was not enough and needed to be backed up by pamphlets calling for the setting up of class trade unions independent of every party, unions that would embark upon a clear-cut defence of the workers' interests, against both the state trusts and the private employers.

The first one was launched over a cut to wages introduced simultaneously in several plants in the industrial district of Moscow in the shape of a reduction in rates paid for piece-work. The pamphlet underlined how indifferent the official unions had been in the face of this attack on pay and it argued that any opposition was not about to succeed unless it relied on class trade unionism.

The draft agreement between England and Russia, on which both governments had in principle agreed, gave rise to a second pamphlet: the negotiations were proceeding in the midst of the greatest secrecy; the workers were never briefed on how they were going; the press carried only vague hints picked up by some bourgeois reporter; the delegates had set to work without having established beforehand what the Russian proletariat was after and they were prepared to cave in and sign a treaty; the plan provided for a clause awarding a measure of compensation to British employers damaged by the October revolution. We stated that on this occasion also the trade unions had fallen down on the job; they had remained silent whereas, at a secret conference, the Russian and British governments were preparing to have Russian workers pay for their possession of the factories already taken over and kept in spite of all the military interventions. Once again, our pamphlet saw this as grounds for setting up class trade unions.

Around July, the Russian leadership orchestrated a huge campaign to boost productivity rates, as they put it. In actual fact, those scientific terms boiled down to requiring the worker to step up the rate of productivity whilst keeping wages at the same level. The technicians were starting to sugar the pill with talk of introducing brand-new machinery, rationalized methods, but at the same time they let it slip that Russian workers were lazy, that they wasted most of their day.

According to them too, what was needed was a considerable increase in what was deemed normal effort in the workshops and reduction in the rates paid for piece-work, with all of this being enforced just as the regulation work arrangements for the miners were being increased considerably. Our pamphlet warned the workers of the threat that this drive represented because of the absence of class trade unions; under cover of a forward-thinking notion – rationalization of production practices – the ruling class could, without hindrance, and thanks to the silence from the official trade unions, pass the full burden of the escalation in productivity on to the backs on the workers.

Those pamphlets were rough-and-ready, clumsy and simple; but they were put together by men of our own class, from line one through to the signature "A group of Workers"; they con-

tained no clunky terms about freedom in the abstract, but pointed to a practical, concrete and specific course: a reversion to class struggle trade unionism.

In one plant where our comrades had distributed them overnight on the machines, after climbing in through the windows come the morning other, unknown friendly hands had picked them up and pasted them over the official notices. In one foundry workshop, a worker was caught on the hop by a communist in the act of reading one of these pamphlets: the Chair of the Factory Committee arrived, fuming and threatening to have him sacked and tried to get him to admit who had given it to him; but the workers steadfastly insisted that he had picked it up off the ground.

However, one of our people was caught in a *tchainia* (people's cafe). Even though he had cast around himself the wary glance that is so typical of the Russian worker these days when he is on the brink of offering an opinion, they had failed to spot the face of a 'grass' laying in wait in one corner and the latter spotted him take the criminal pamphlets from his pocket.

That night the working-class Simonovka district reverted to scenes not witnessed since Kolchak's rule. The noises made by powerful cars woke up those who had been kept awake all day the escalation in productivity rates; ordinarily, such vehicles kept to the city centre, ferrying some trust manager in comfort; that night, they pulled up outside ugly workers' homes to ferry some workmen off to prison GPU (the Russian police) officers brutally ransacked all the homes and took away the fathers, leaving the wives and children distraught and crying.

One week later, and it was my turn: on venturing outside one morning, I spotted a fellow at the corner of the street who was watching me from a doorway; I had twigged a few days earlier that they were spying on me and I simply reckoned that the hunt was going to continue; nevertheless, after I had taken a few more steps, I saw that person speaking with three of his own ilk; on reaching the corner, I paused to buy myself a newspaper and found myself grabbed from behind, whilst one officer pressed the barrel of his gun into my face; A car lurking in a dead-end street then pulled up at speed; I was bundled inside like a parcel and the frisking started immediately; As I asked to see their warrant for arresting me, these individuals claimed to be working for the crime squad; but the direction taken by the car immediately told me all I needed to know and, within a few minutes, I was passing through the doors and along the intricate corridors of the luxurious building occupied by the police in the Lubyanka Square.

After a painstaking search, and once the officers had examined me from every angle and sneered at my working clothes, I was taken to an office, high-ceilinged and brightly lit, where examining magistrate Slaviatinski was waiting for me, the very type of a refined and punctilious Polish intellectual who, with exquisite politeness, invited me to have a cigarette.

After he heard me decline the invitation in the same tone, he asked me if I could guess why I had been arrested: since my response was that I could not, he stated emphatically that he knew for certain that I was the instigator and leader of the "group of workers"; to which I replied that at no time in my life had I been or wanted to be leader of anything. He explained that, if so inclined, he could refuse to take a statement from me, but, according to him, there was no dignity in any effort to cover up. When I replied that, actually, I was refusing, as a syndicalist anarchist, to make any statement to an institution that functioned without any worker supervision, he jotted down that statement and handed me over to the gaolers.

So then it was down the endless staircase, led by an officer who was carrying a revolver in his hand with his finger on the trigger; they put me in a huge cell, teeming with people; most of the floor area was covered by a crude, filthy, wooden plank platform without any bedding; the

tremendous grime was suited to the nick-name of “the dog bed” of that the inmates there had bestowed upon it; they were all sorts – officers and workers, there was even a fifteen year-old lad charged with having been part of an underground youth gang; there was no exercise period; and if, in the morning or overnight, one had to go to the toilets just to stretch one’s legs and grab a breath of fresh air, the sentries with their fixed bayonets use to threaten us brutally. The average stay there about four or five days; sometimes as many as ten.

From there I was moved to another premises of the same sort, albeit cleaner and referred to as preventive custody and I was there only a couple of days before I was admitted to the prison proper.

Another painstaking search and there I was, alone in my cell: the window-pane was shattered and covered by a thin metal plate in any case; in that prison the regime was designed to maintain the illusion of hygienic conditions whilst at the same time undermining the individual’s health and morale; on one hand, there was a gleaming waxed tarpaulin and on the other, as a general rule, not one minute’s exercise in the open air over a period of three, four or five months; on one hand, there was no familiarity with the prisoner and, on the other, one was constantly being monitored through the spy-hole in the door; the very same gaolers watched over the women being held in similar conditions; one was allowed to wash twice a day, but barely five minutes were allowed for visits to the toilets and for washing-up. The Administration amused itself by having the inmates clean out the toilets.

On a daily basis, the gaoler passed by and asked of you wanted to see the nurse; but the help afforded by the latter was just farcical; one day, after the nurse had checked me over and discovered that I had a fever, I asked her to take my temperature using a thermometer, only to be told that I was not in hospital and she steadfastly refused the request, even after I had taken to my bed for four days; not that I received any response to the complaint I made about the matter. As a rule, in the inner prison, there was a ban on all correspondence; one was allowed neither paper nor pencil nor newspaper; if the examining magistrate approved it, you might get two books a week, drawn from the library and one could not choose. The regulations emphatically insisted that the sentries were entitled to shoot without warning at any prisoner spotted at the window; strict silence was rigorously enforced; the slightest murmur or even whistling could end up with one being clapped in the dungeons; which was restrictive and dark and dank and where the prisoner was often held entirely naked; all communication between inmates was cracked down on, severely; in cells where there were several prisoners together, the had to keep all talk to a whisper; no distinction was made between politicals and ordinary prisoners. At night, every room had its spyhole open a crack and the sentry peered through; those on their own in their cells had their light left on all night. The rations were confined to a pound of black bread and a cup of cabbage soup at midday with a few morsels of meat and, at night, a stew of badly ground oatmeal. One was issued with a straw mattress to sleep on; no blankets, sheets or pillows; generally, the mattress passed from one inmate to another without being washed. The regimen was particularly hard on workers who, living in poverty as they did, were unable to rely upon their families for supplementary rations or bedding. At no time was the inner prison, nor any of those strictly reserved for politicals – in Suzdal, Tobolsk, Verkhne-Uralsk or Yaroslav – visited by foreign labour or communist delegations.

Two afternoons are etched on my memory forever: one was 24 December and the other 30 December; from our cells we could hear the heart-rending screams and moans of a woman. After I asked the gaoler what was going on, only to be told that that was no concern of mine, I pounded

on the door, kicking up as loud as stink as I could, along with a Trotskyist by the name of Zavarin and a communist member of Worker's Truth, by the name of Hainkevitch. The boss of the prison arrived, though not before attaching a sabre to his belt and carrying a pistol at his waist; it was only when he saw that we were ready for anything and after we told him that unless they killed us we would some day tell all that was done with the prisoners that he relented a little, mumbled a few excuses and issued his orders: the screaming stopped. It was the same again on 30 December, except that the communists were no longer there and my protest was supported by the Social Democrat, Karlinski.

A fortnight after my arrest, they brought me into the office where a junior official told me to let him have the names of the other members of the group. I refused and he cautioned me that I was being accused of having breached two articles of the Code – articles 58 and 59, if memory serves; I remember that one of them said something to the effect that I must have been a member of an organization whose purpose was to collaborate with the international bourgeoisie; it was pointed out to me that I was in jeopardy of several sentences ranging from one year in prison to death; and then, with a smile, he told me that the article was a bit on the crude side. And that was all I ever saw by way of a formal charge.

They questioned me a further two times: at one of these interrogations, they presented me with the statements made (so they said) by my comrades: they contained precise details about those who had taken part in our group meetings; they were like accounts given by persons out of their minds and did not delve into the deeper reasons that had prompted us to try to set up class trade unions.

Again I refused to offer any specific details as to the group's make-up; I owned up to the part that I had played in the drafting and distribution of pamphlets and stipulated that, in getting involved in that initiative, I had merely been exercising my right of association as a worker.

On 31 December I was called back for further questioning: instead of taking me to the office, they searched me thoroughly and then handed me the following document, which I can still recall, almost word for word:

“Extract from the minutes of the meeting of the Special Conference of the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs:

ITEM: LAZAREVITCH CASE

DETERMINATION: That he be locked up in a concentration camp for three years.

12 December 1924.”

So a worker was being sentenced to three years in a concentration camp for having tried to set up a trade union and without any formal charge having been presented to him; judged by intellectuals who determined his fate without even seeing him, at a meeting at which they must have examined a large number of cases; his class would never know the accusation made against him, or the sentence; that sentence would never be published in the press; he would never have the opportunity to explain himself to his comrades.

I ought to note that, shortly before this, an intellectual like Savinkov had been allowed to mount a detailed defence and had the entire press at his disposal in the publication of it.

On the very same on which they had read the extract from the minutes, they transferred me to the Butyrki prison; I was dropped off at the men's cellular prison and they gave me a cell measuring three paces by ten and initially I was subject to the criminal law regimen: fifteen minutes' exercise, on my own, in a tarmacked yard, surrounded by high walls, lousy food, and a bread ration cut to half a pound. At first, I did not know that I was classed as a common law prisoner: most of the time, I exercised at night; thanks to a slip by the gaoler I found out that there were some political convicts in the prison who enjoyed slightly better rations and one hour's exercise; After a number of determined and vigorous protests, they granted me the regimen that applied to the intellectuals; later, I asked the political if they too had been subjected to the common law regimen; I was convinced that that measure had been reserved especially for a worker detainee.

Accommodation there was the same as in the inner prison: except that the regulations were not so strictly enforced. There too, there was to be no showing oneself at the windows; the light had to be left on all night and only seriously ill inmates were granted the relief of dimmed light; talking and singing were banned; there were no metal plates over the windows and the glass panes were intact; one was free to read the newspapers as long as one had the money to buy them; but again the full weight of the regimen was borne by the poorer inmate; without money, there were no additional rations, no writing paper and no pencil; the administration never issued blankets nor coverings of any sort; nor underwear; it even refused to repair the prisoners' footwear; so you can imagine what condition the worker detainees must have been in.

Officially, one was entitled to write letters and of course these were subject to police inspection; but whenever the police were out to break a prisoner, they refused to pass letters on, capitalizing on the fact that he had no way of knowing whether his family was actually writing to him.

Such was the case of the anarchist Motchenovsky who had been imprisoned for four and a half years for having had a hand in the editing of a newspaper that had refused to submit to censorship; he had a further five years left to serve and they were hoping to force him to sue for clemency if they could starve him of his correspondence. Even though he was ill and the prison doctors acknowledged the fact, they stopped me from putting a few roubles into his account so that he might buy some food.

From April through to June 1925, the administration supplied us detainees with no water except on Sundays, alleging that there was a problem with the pipework; you can imagine the state of the toilets with no water, as a result of this measure.

It tickles me to recall that the British MP Lansbury, following visits to the corridors set aside for certain privileged categories of common law prisoners could write in all seriousness that "the prison regime is not of concern to the prisoners."

In June 1925 I took vigorous exception to the fact that, although I had been sentenced to a concentration camp, they had been holding me by then upwards of ten months in prison; such discriminatory treatment inflicted upon a worker detainee was particularly outrageous since, as a rule, intellectual prisoners served no more than a month or two in prison after sentencing. As a result of my protests, they moved me to the Suzdal so-called concentration camp.

The latter is in actuality just a former monastery in the city, adapted for use as a prison. Since it has been described on several occasions, I shall not go into detail about it; I shall confine myself to saying this: here too persons sentenced without a trial are still suffering a very severe prison regimen; prisoners are placed in groups of two or three and also held in separate cells on their

own; the regimen is reminiscent of that in the Butyrki; there is the same obligation to stay silent, the same ban on communicating with one another; given that here we are talking about prisoners serving their sentences and who therefore do not need to be prevented from plotting together, the only possible explanation for this regimen is a delight in cruelty, an ailment with which the highest-ranking officers of the GPU are afflicted.

Medical attention comes from a quack who is not at all bad-natured but he is subject to orders coming from the commandant.

Thus, a few days before the death of the Social Democrat Schenkman, it became necessary for him to be transferred to the sunny side of the hospital. But as the commandant was against that, it never occurred to him to pay any heed to the doctor's authority. On another occasion, he identified the Social Democrat Goretski as suffering an attack of rheumatism and mentioned the need for him to be removed to a less damp cell; because of the commandant's resistance to this, even though there were a lot of cells left empty on the top floor once the Georgian socialists had moved on, Goretski was not moved, and the doctor never spoke a word of complaint.

On 7 November the very same Goretski had a violent seizure in the cell that he was sharing with me; He fell on to his bed, moaning and asked me to approach a gaoler to fetch him a few drops of sedative from a neighbouring prisoner. Unfortunately, a notorious chief guard by the name of Blinov was on hand; he stepped into the cell and told me that there could be no movement of medicines from one cell to another, or, if any did take place, it had to be done through the nurse; I explained to him how serious the matter was and asked him to summon the nurse; he refused, arguing that it was a holiday and he also turned down my request that the commandant be fetched so that I might make a complaint. Caught between the gaoler's grin as he relished my powerlessness and the body of a man foaming at the mouth and writhing around on his bed, I was at a loss to know what to do. Luckily, when they opened the doors to let us step out for our exercise I managed to dart quickly into the other inmate's cell and snatched the sedative from him before Blinov's very eyes and brought it to Goretski who managed to swallow it. From then on, Blinov was on the look-out for a chance to catch me out.

There is one essential point that needs to be flagged up, that, once their sentence had been served, prisoners were not discharged but were taken back to the GPU in Moscow again; there they were interrogated all over again and often the questioner was the very same examining magistrate as before; if, following that interrogation or conversation, after the usual amount of time, the official found that the prisoner would not disown his past, he was served with another article of the Code; the matter was referred again to a secret meeting so that another sentence might be passed, a sentence of three years' banishment this time. Here is a list of the names of detainees who, after serving their sentences in Suzdal, had to start a brand-new term of banishment:

- July 1925: V. Arkavina, Social Democrat, banished to Tashkent for three years.
- August 1925: E. Friend, Social Democrat, banished to Orenburg for three years.
- December 1925: G. Kotz, Social Democrat, banished to Semipalatinsk for three years.
- December 1925: I. Beresnieff, Left Social Revolutionary, banished to Siberia for three years.
- December 1925: A. Sokolovskai, Left Social Revolutionary, banished to Tashkent for three years.

If there are no other anarchist names in that list, that is because the GPU, despite lots of repeated protests, was very careful to keep me on my own in the midst of socialists: it was dealing here with a worker prisoner and this was yet another way of making his sentence harder by planting him in the company of his enemies, which it was reckoned was the way to break him.

I was transferred again to the Butyrki prison in March 1926, in the wake of a pretty serious accident. As I had been sentenced to three years in a camp, I had always thought it against the law that they could arbitrarily convert that sentence to three years of imprisonment: I realized, being cut off from the working class by the prison walls, that my protestations served only to add to the officials' unhealthy delight in cruelty.

That was why I made up my mind to fight back only against measures that undermined my morale unduly, which is to say, against the rule of absolute silence; so, whenever I took it into my head to sing inside my cell, I did just that and it really niggled the gaolers that a locked-up worker was still not properly broken; they passed lots of comments about me and depicted me as an individual whose behaviour was not to be tolerated; one day, while passing the open cell of another two inmates who belonged to my exercise cohort, I made to drop in to return a book to them (this was allowed when the prisoners belonged to the same cohort), one of the guards reached out a hand to bar my way; I pressed on regardless, pushing his hand aside with my chest; chief guard Blinov, who had been gunning for me for a long time, showed up and tried to push me out again; but as I stood my ground and so did the other two inmates, they did not press the matter. Since he was dealing with a worker, he argued that I had ten minutes to pack my things, whereas intellectuals were always allowed between two and seven hours to get their stuff together and bid farewell to the other inmates from their exercise cohort. Spotting that I was about to be handed over, on my own, to these folk, whose practices I knew from Salovki and Yaroslav, I made up my mind to resist with all my might. So I refused to walk on and a gang of gaolers rushed into my cell to force my hand; I clung to the window-bars and as they were choking me to get me to release my grip, I called out whatever came into my head to the other prisoners: "Long live the proletariat! Long live Anarchy!" The guards dragged me through the corridors, stuffing their greatcoats into my mouth to stop my subversive shouts; they had come to an empty cell and they tossed me on to the cot there, sat on my legs and an officer decorated with the "Red Banner of Labour" twisted my arms, delicately smiling as he told me: "Calm yourself."

Within minutes the commandant arrived on the scene and got the guards to release me, telling me that, although I might be a political, I was behaving like a bandit. My response to that was that I would always stand on my dignity as a worker. They bundled me into a sledge and brought to the city of Vladimir, travelling through a blizzard; contrary to what usually happened, they were very careful not to let me have the heavy blanket meant for prisoners, who were opt supposed to make the slightest movement in transit; with a revolver pointed at me, I arrived at the staging-post (half-way mark in the journey) as stiff as a board; even the peasants from the village, subjected to the rule of terror, could not help asking the commandant who was fat and well wrapped up in his furs: "How come you're transporting him like that?" That simple, timid query made my guard realize that of course I would not make my destination alive and he let me have a thin blanket for cover. On arrival in Moscow, I served another three months in the inner prison and underwent two interrogations, in the course of which I gave a detailed account of the treatment that had been meted out to me; the only response I received from Andreieva, the acting head of the secret operations section, was that in future I should abide by the prison regulations and that

they would then move me to a political isolator where there were other anarchists. As I gave no such undertaking, I was locked up again in a cell in the Butyrki prison. I remained there under the described conditions until expelled from Russia.

But that incident was to have serious ramifications in Suzdal prison.

A week later, during an inspection visit by the commandant, he gave the Left Social Revolutionary inmates Zheleznov, the worker Gerassimov and Padgorski a slap each "for protesting against the brutality employed against political prisoner Lazarévitch". The prisoners were hoping that sooner or later their action might reach the ears of the working-class which would work out how to stop the Russian government brutalizing its imprisoned sons. They were transferred to Moscow, charged with having infringed some article of the Code; they were informed that their gesture of protest would be considered a political offence; and even though Padgorski and Zheleznov had already served two years of their sentences and Gerassimov nearly three of his, they got a further two and three years; imprisonment; something hitherto unprecedented in the treatment of political prisoners and they were shipped off to serve their sentences in the company of common law offenders and thus were denied the meagrely better rations and exercise rights to which 'politicals' are entitled. But above all, being completely cut off from their comrades and swallowed up by the terrified mass of ordinary convicts, they could be quietly eliminated by the commandants of the prisons in which they were now living. Reports from prisoners say that Zheleznov and Gerassimov were dispatched to the Solovietzki Islands (where according to the Russian government, socialists and anarchists are no longer being sent) and Padgorski to Viatka. I have no time for socialists of any persuasion, but the treatment meted out to these three men can also be applied to any worker detainee; and I do not believe that the workers the world over should let this matter go, without telling the Russian intellectuals' government in unmistakable terms that the torture has to stop.

As to what L'Humanité has to say about the good treatment dispensed to me, I ought to say for the benefit of any persons of good faith among its readership that in fact I was at no time able to turn my hand to translations, but did everything within my power to prevent that text from being forwarded to the addressee); and as for the kid-glove treatment, let me briefly explain the price we had to pay for wanting, on the first of May, to remember that, in spite of everything, we were of one mind with all the workers of the world. On that date, the political prisoners in the men's cellular prison pulled themselves up on the bars and called out to one another, yelling: "Long live the First of May!" We answered the abuse coming from the guards with shouts of "Down with the new bourgeoisie! Death to the police!"

One hour after that, as I was proceeding down the corridor, intending to step outside into the yard for some exercise, I saw that the staircase was crammed with angry gaolers. They instructed me to go to the office; I refused; and then the commandant arrived and led his men in assaulting me; they dragged me by the feet, my head bouncing off the steps, thrashing my body with a cane and punching and kicking me in the face – even the warders; once there, they hung me upside down and, on the commandant's orders, placed me in a strait-jacket, even though I was barely conscious by then; they only managed it after several failed attempts and then they looked around for the most uncomfortable position; they set me down on a bench whilst raining punches on my kidneys; ten minutes after that, I lay down on my side, only for them to reappear and hitch me to the bench from behind; unfortunately, one head warder happened along who urged the rest to sit on top of me. He ordered the others that, should I ask or something to drink, they were to smash a copper mug that was handy against my mouth "to ensure that he goes

thirsty". A few hours later, I suffering from a bad cramp, they untied me and removed me to the Pugatchev tower, to some damp, dirty cells where the other political prisoners guilty of having marked the first of may were being held – Zheleznov, Gerassimov, Padgorski (Left Social Revolutionaries), Garrack-Bystrov (Social Democrat), Motchenovsky (anarchist) and a young Zionist. We demanded to see the prosecutor; the Administration ignored us; we asked for paper and ink so that we could make out a written complaint; again, this was refused. A more determined protest followed by obstruction earned us a visit from Doukis, the head of the prisons branch; to him I made a formal complaint about the treatment I had just been receiving and asked to be brought face to face with the gaolers and guard commanders; his response was that there was no way that any such brutality could have occurred in his prisons. He ordered us led back to our cells, but left the young Zionist behind in the tower. Once we discovered that, Zheleznov's handsome face appeared above the bars and he started shouting, demanding to share the Zionist's fate, and we were taken back to the tower again. This time a drunken Doukis led the operation himself and the gaolers' fury was vented through punches and curses directed at the Left Social Revolutionaries. The following morning we began chatting at the windows and the sentry fired a shot at mine; the bullet slammed into the wall. Again we requested paper so that we could fill out our complaint for the prosecutor. They tied us up again and separated me from the others and I was taken to the clock tower. From there, after two days on hunger-strike, I was brought back to my cell. There, on 11 May, I then wrote up a long, detailed complaint for the prosecutor of the Republic; not that I was ever questioned about the matter. I never set eyes on any of those held in the tower again, with the exception of the Social Democrat Garrack-Bystrov who, although he was a political prisoner, was shipped off to the Solovki Islands like a common criminal.

I should make it clear that I was at no time released. The very same secret courts that had held me in prison for two years switched my sentence to one of open-ended banishment. During the most recent interrogation sessions, I had specified that I wanted to stay in Russia; not that it did me any good and, under a police escort and after being denied the opportunity to shake hands with my own brother, I was taken to the borders of Estonia.

This instance of being punished for membership of a workers' coalition is absolutely true and specific; the supreme organs of the Russian Communist Party who said nary a word about the matter were aware of it; this goes to show the sort of hurdles the working class runs into whenever it tries to articulate its wishes.

In light of this situation, the essential thing is to cling to one's sangfroid; not to play the game of the world reaction which seeks to harness workers' indignation in order to bring back its parliamentary rule, after having inflicted a bloodbath on the Russian proletariat, guilty for having sought to run its factories for itself.

Plainly the bulk of the work is up to the Russian comrades; it is up to them to sort out their trade union movement whilst passing through the prison system and being banished. For that to be achieved, they are going to have to see to it that all matters of importance, all the elections within the trade union organizations and in the Soviets, are conducted by secret ballot, so that each and every worker can be absolutely sure that he will not be bothered because he spoke his mind; the first guarantee here can be offered with an announcement that every worker should be tried by his peers, in people's courts, with the proceedings, defence case, statements and verdicts all being made public; and that every matter handled administratively by the GPU will be publicly reviewed and all detained workers be brought in front of judges who are also workers.

Workers elsewhere can be of very great help by bringing pressure to bear on the Russian government to secure the unfettered exercise of the wishes of the workers.

We invite not just the usual rebel workers and libertarians but also non-party workers who despise bosses everywhere, plus many communist worker comrades to join us in this effort.

The latter may believe that we are mistaken in extrapolating from what they contend are just isolated cases; but it is my belief that they will be in agreement with us in preventing any repetition of these disgraceful events by ensuring effective implementation of workers' control by the masses of the proletariat.

Worker greetings,

N. LAZARÉVITCH

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Nicholas Lazarevitch
What I Witnessed in Russia
1926

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