

In the Prisons of Russia

Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman and Alexander Schapiro

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Having but recently left Russia, we feel that our first and most urgent words must be spoken in behalf of our political prisoners in Russia.

It is a sad, heartbreaking commentary upon the situation in Russia to speak of political prisoners in the land of the Social Revolution! Yet such is the fact, unfortunately. Nor do we refer to counter-revolutionists who might be, conceivably, prisoners of the Revolution. Incredible as it may seem, the jails and prisons of Russia are today densely populated by the best revolutionary elements of the country, by men and women of the highest social ideals and aspirations. Throughout the whole vast country, in Russia proper as in Siberia, in the prisons of the old régime and in those of the new, in the incommunicado dungeons of the Tche-ka's Ossoby Otdell (Special Section), there languish revolutionaries of every party and movement : Social Revolutionists of the Left, Maximalists, Communist followers of the "Labour Opposition," Anarchists, Anarcho-Syndicalists, and Universalists — adherents of various schools of social philosophy, but all of them true revolutionists, and most of them enthusiastic participants in the November Revolution of 1917.

The position of these political prisoners is pitiable in the extreme. Not to speak of their mental anguish and suffering, the purely physical side of their existence is unspeakably miserable. Owing to the general conditions in Russia, the lack of building material and skilled labour, the repair of prisons is practically out of the question. The hygienic conditions are, therefore, in the great majority of cases, of the most primitive character. But worst of all is the food problem. At no time during its existence has the Bolshevik Government been able to supply sufficient food for its prisoners. Their rations did not cover the lowest possible minimum of bare existence. The actual support of the prisoners fell upon the shoulders of their friends, relatives, and comrades. But now the situation has grown still worse. With only 52 per cent. of the food-tax collected and practically no prospects of collecting more, with the terrific famine in the Volga provinces, and with the general breakdown of the economic machinery of the Government, the situation of the prison population is indeed a hopeless one.

The needs of the political prisoners in Russia are ministered to, to the extent of its naturally very limited possibilities, by the Political Red Cross of Russia, a very devoted and efficient organisation, of which the famous old revolutionist Vera Figner is an active member. This organisation, depending entirely on voluntary co-operation, has been eminently successful in its mission, considering how difficult it is for any one in Russia to spare donations from his own very scanty

rations. On the whole, however, the Political Red Cross has been able to supply the most absolute necessities of the political prisoners.

Of all, excepting the Anarchists. Not that the Red Cross wishes to discriminate. On the contrary, that organisation is quite non-partisan, although sharply tinged with Right Wing elements. For political reasons, therefore, the Anarchists of Russia had long ago initiated the policy of themselves ministering to the wants of their imprisoned comrades, and it has for years been the established custom for the Anarchist Red Cross (later known as the Black Cross) to take care of all Anarchists in Russian prisons. All along it has been a herculean task for the Russian Anarchists that were at liberty to look after the needs of their arrested comrades. Many of the most active spirits had laid down their lives in the Revolution, great numbers had died at the front defending the Revolution, while others had been shot or were languishing in Bolshevik prisons. Most of those that still remained alive and out of prison were themselves constantly on the verge of starvation : the Black Cross had to exert veritably superhuman efforts to keep its incarcerated comrades from actually starving to death. It has accomplished most self-sacrificing, noble work.

But if its task till now has been hard and difficult, it has now become immeasurably so. The new policy of the Bolsheviki of *systematic* persecution of Anarchists is proving a fearful handicap on the work of the Black Cross. Most of its own members being in prison, the organisation was recently reorganised and is now known as the SOCIETY FOR THE RELIEF OF ANARCHISTS IN RUSSIAN PRISONS. It is heroically continuing the work of giving what material aid it can muster to the imprisoned comrades. Unfortunately, its possibilities in that direction are most limited. The comrades at liberty are depriving themselves even of some necessities of life, in order to send a few more pounds of bread and of potatoes to the prisoners. They are willing, aye, glad, to share their very last. But they have so little, and their comrades in prison are so many and their need so great! From the prisons of Moscow, of Petrograd, from Orel and Vladimir, from the distant provinces in the East, and from the comrades exiled to the frozen North comes terrible news. The fearful scourge of starvation, the dreaded *tzinga* (scurvy), is attacking them! Their hands and feet are swelling, their gums loosening, teeth falling out, decay setting in in the living body!

Will the comrades at large give ear to the cry for help? The Anarchists of Russia are now utterly unable to supply even the most elementary wants of their prisoners without the assistance of the comrades and friends abroad. In the name of the Society for the Relief of Anarchists in Russian Prisons, in the name of our martyred comrades now freezing and starving in the Bolshevik prisons, suffering for their loyalty to high ideals, we make this appeal to you, comrades and friends everywhere. Only your generous and immediate help can save our imprisoned comrades from death by starvation.

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