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The Story of a Leaflet and the Fate of Anarchist Varshavskiy

(From the History of Anarchist Resistance to
Totalitarianism)

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Retrieved on 13th May 2021 from www.katesharpleylibrary.net
Published in 30 Oktyabrya newspaper, #66. 2006. pp. 8–9.
socialist.memo.ru . Translated by: — Szarapow.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

Some researchers, generally following the 1960s-1980s Soviet historiographic tradition, view the 1920s as a period of crisis and decline of the anarchist movement in the territory of the USSR.¹ According to works by other authors and the documents published in late 1990s-early 2000s it is evident that the active struggle of anarchist organisations in many regions of the USSR continued throughout the 1920s in conditions of repression and illegality. During that time the anarchists attempted to reconstitute the federations that were previously smashed, published leaflets and underground magazines, actively participated in the unemployed

¹ See: Kanev S.N. Oktyabrskaya revolyutsiya i krakh anarkhizma (borba partii bolshevikov protiv anarkhizma 1917–1922 gg.). Ī. 1974. Yermakov V.D. Anarkhistskoye dvizheniye v Rossii: istoriya i sovremennost. SPb. 1997. Shtyrbul A.A. Anarkhistskoye dvizheniye v Sibiri v 1-y chetverti XX veka. (1900–1925). Chast 2. Omsk. 1996. And also articles by V.V. Krivenkiy in: Politicheskiye partii Rossii: istoriya i sovremennost. M. 1996. S. 32–35.

workers' riots, agitated for the creation of independent unions of workers, unemployed and peasants, called for the struggle to destroy the bureaucratic regime through social revolution and building of the stateless communist society based on self-government. The OGPU even noted the cases of expropriations organised by anarchists. The range of social strata that the anarchists worked with in this period is pretty wide. It's workers and unemployed, peasants, teachers, students and those who were "purged" from institutes of higher education due to being politically suspect, conscripts and soldiers, RKSM (Russian Communist Youth Union) members and former VKP(b) (All-Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik) members, even the Cossacks.² The anarcho-mystics' circles that operated among the intelligentsia were also pretty numerous in the 1920s.³ Attempts to reconstitute anarchist organizations continued into the 1930s. The best-known

² "Sovershenno sekretno": Lubyanka – Stalinu o polozhenii v strane (1922–1934 gg.). Tom 2. S. 31, 49, 97, 104–105, 131, 142, 153–154, 180–181, 209–210, 240, 271, 294, 307–309, 392, 397–398. See also: Yarutskiy M. Makhno i makhnovtsy. Mariupol. 1995. S. 330–342. Razumov A. Pamyati yunosti Lidii Chukovskoi. / / Zvezda. 1999. # 9. S. 117–136. Leontiyev Ya.V. Iz istorii poslednikh stranits anarkho-dvizheniya v SSSR: delo A. Barona i S. Ruvinskogo (1934 g.) // Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin I problemy modelirovaniya istoriko-kulturnogo razvitiya tsivilizatsii: materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii. SPb. 2005. S. 157–171. Glushakov Yu.E. Idei P.A. Kropotkina I ikh posledovateli v Belorussii: o sudbakh i deyatelnosti anarkhistov v 1920-30-ye gg. // Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin I problemy modelirovaniya istoriko-kulturnogo razvitiya tsivilizatsii: materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii. SPb. 2005. S. 82–83. On the activities and fates of Russia's anarchists in 1920s see also: Nikitin A.L. Mistiki, rozenkreitseri i tamplieri v Sovetskoj Rossii: issledovaniya i materialy. M. 2000; Bykovskiy S. Anarkhisty – chleny Vsesoyuznogo obshchestva politkatorzhan i ssynoposelentsev. // Vsesoyuznoye obshchestvo politkatorzhan i ssynoposelentsev. Obrazovaniye, razvitiye, likvidatsiya. 1921–1935. M. 2004. S. 83–108; Dolzhanskaya L.A. "Ya byl i ostalsya anarkhistom". Sudba Franchesko Gettsi (po materialam sledstvennogog dela). // Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin I problemy modelirovaniya istoriko-kulturnogo razvitiya tsivilizatsii: materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii. SPb. 2005. S. 238–256.

³ See: Nikitin A.L. Op. cit.; Orden rossiyskikh tampliyerov. Tt. 1–3. Ī. 2003.

of those include the attempts to revive to Nabat Confederation of Ukrainian Anarchists (Konfederatsiya anarkhistov Ukrainy Nabat) in 1934 and the activity of the underground anarchist group at the Stalingrad chemical plant in 1937.⁴

Studying the archived investigation cases of anarchists uncovers for researchers new, hitherto unknown facts related to the history of resistance to the Bolshevik regime in the late 1920s. One of these we will talk about in this article.

On January 11, 1926 the Supreme Court of the USA finally confirmed a death sentence for American anarcho-communists, members of the workers' movement Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti who were arrested on false charges of killing and robbing a paymaster of a shoe factory in South Braintree on April 15, 1920, as well as a number of other expropriations. Although the two men's innocence was proven, the court rejected the appeal by the defense. On August 23, 1927 both were executed. The protest campaign, which in many countries included demonstrations in front of US embassies and clashes with police, was not ignored by the USSR. The Comintern Executive Committee issued appeals protesting the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti on August 26 and 27, 1927. The leadership of the VKP(b) and organizations under its control developed a country-wide official protest campaign that included mass demonstrations, meetings at factories and plants and sending protest resolutions to the USA.⁵

The anarchists also participated in the campaign for Sacco and Vanzetti. In the Summer of 1927 a group of Moscow anarchists sent abroad a telegram protesting Sacco and Vanzetti's sentence. It was signed by 12 people. At the same time the Moscow anarchists decided to organise a protest meeting. It was expected that

⁴ Leontiyev Ya.V. Op. cit. S. 160–162. Shubin A.V. Anarkhiya – mat poryadka. Mezhdru krasnymi i belymi. Ī. 2005. S. 378–380.

⁵ For more details about this campaign see: Kulyshch Yu. Sakko i Vantsetti. Ī. 1963. S. 38, 43, 44. For the texts of the Comintern Executive Committee appeals see: Gornev A. Borba za Sakko i Vantsetti. M. 1927. S. 30–32.

its proposed aim – to express outrage at persecution of members of revolutionary workers’ movement in capitalist countries – would not cause it to be banned. Apart from the chief purpose of the meeting, as one of its sponsors N. I. Varshavskiy noted in his testimony several years later, “it was supposed that the meeting would provide us with an opportunity to propagate anarchist ideas and cause the listener to sympathise with them”.⁶ The meeting was supposed to be addressed by well-known anarchists – Vladimir Barmash, Alexei Borovoi, Nikolai Rogdayev, Vladimir Khudolei and Ivan Kharkhardin. Barmash and Varshavskiy handed in the application to hold a meeting to the Administrative department of the Moscow soviet several times but they were refused. The meeting did not take place.

Let’s talk a little about our article’s chief hero.

Noi Ilyich Varshavskiy [translator’s note: The biography on Memorial website (socialist.memo.ru) by Anatoly Dubovik gives his first name as Noi (not Non). Taken from documents of the Political Red Cross (Politicheskiy Krasniy Krest), and their questionnaires.] was born in 1895 in Poltava in a Jewish petty bourgeois family. His father was a white-collar worker in a printing-house. From his early childhood Varshavskiy lived in Kursk where he graduated from a commercial school by 1914. Between 1915 and 1921 he lived in Kiev where he went in order to get further education. It seems that he didn’t succeed in that – the questionnaire he filled in during his arrest in 1949 lists his education as “primary.”⁷ From 1921 he lived in Moscow. By then Varshavskiy was married⁸ and had a daughter.⁹ After meeting anarchist P. Chernenko in Kursk in 1911 he was an anarchist sympathizer though he didn’t take an active part in the movement.

⁶ GARF (State archive of the Russian Federation). F. 10035. Op. 1. D. P-30827. L. 21 ob – 22.

⁷ Ibid. L. 6 ob.

⁸ Wife – Anna Lvovna Nisnevich (born 1895).

⁹ Daughter – Liya Nonovna Varshavskaya (born 1919).

in 1927 or 1949 which wasn't that easy at the time. Until 1949 Varshavskiy kept anarchist literature at home which was dangerous for him as an ex-anarchist.

Between 1915 and 1927 Varshavskiy's interest in anarchism was expressed in buying and reading anarchist literature, befriending some anarchists and visiting – in 1917 and 1919 – the anarchist and maximalist club in Kiev. Actually, Varshavskiy's active participation in the anarchist movement started in 1927. At the time he worked as deputy head of the labour protection department in the Central Committee of the chemical industry trade union where he met anarchist Mariya Vartanovna Petrosova who worked in the same department. Petrosova introduced him to one of the leaders of Moscow anarcho-communists, Vladimir Vladimirovich Barmash with whom he formed a close friendship. Varshavskiy also knew other anarchists – Khudolei, Kharkhardin, Ghezzi, Rogdayev, Borovoi, Alexei Solonovich, as well as anarcho-syndicalist Gerasimchuk.¹⁰

Indignant at the authorities' refusal to permit the meeting, in early August 1927 Varshavskiy wrote a leaflet, the text of which we reproduce here:

With the oppressed against oppressors – always!

WORKING MEN AND WOMEN!

For seven years, every day waiting for the execution, in the torture-chambers of American bourgeoisie two workers languish – anarchists SACCO and VANZETTI.

The electric chair threatens the fighters who gave all of their days to the cause of liberation of the oppressed from the yoke of capital, to the cause of struggle for the future society where no man would exploit another.

¹⁰ Pavel Petrovich Gerasimchuk, printer, from 1924 – one of the founders of the anarcho-syndicalist publishing house "Golos truda" ("Voice of Labour"). Varshavskiy knew him since 1925. At the time Gerasimchuk worked at the Federatsiya (Federation) anarchist bookstore in Moscow where Varshavskiy was buying anarchist literature.

It's not the first time that the furious slave-owners try to make short work of the slaves who realize the tasks that lie ahead of them. There's no government in the world, be it fascist, democratic or Soviet, the hands of which wouldn't be stained with blood of conscious anarchist proletarians but no amount of terror will ever stop the coming revolution, or weaken the workers' will to fight. Every execution recruits new thousands into our ranks.

The savage reprisal that is being prepared for Sacco and Vanzetti has stirred up millions-strong masses of workers; the proletariat of the entire world wrestles two of its committed fighters from the strong claws of the bourgeoisie through striking and demonstrating, besieging the American consulates and boycotting American products.

Even the bureaucratic clique of the various yellow unions and parties, as it fears losing the remainder of their allies, is forced into writing hypocritical protests.

As the ruling Communist party makes noise to support Sacco and Vanzetti, at the same time it stuffs its gaols full of their comrades-in-arms and increases trading with the American capital on the quiet.

Workers of the USSR who are pressed by the grip of the communist reaction would nevertheless not fall behind their brothers abroad and fulfil their task to the end.

Comrades, protest against the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti.

Unmask the hypocrisy of the ruling party, demand the liberation of Sacco and Vanzetti's anarchist comrades who languish in the gaols of the USSR.

Demand the trade relations with America to be broken.

terrogations listed in his case all took place at night and lasted between 1 ½ and 6 hours each.²⁰

Although the investigation admitted that “no data confirming the undertaking of anti-soviet activities by the accused in the following years was discovered,” Varshavskiy, having been an active anarchist in the past, was recognized as a “socially dangerous person.” On February 25, 1950 he was sentenced by the Special Council attached to the USSR Minister for State Security on article 7–35 of the RSFSR Criminal Code to ten years' internal exile in the Krasnoyarsk Territory.²¹

Varshavskiy attempted to dispute the OSO [Special Council] decision as illegal. But his complaint to the Minister of Internal Affairs Lavrentiy Beria, lodged on May 18, 1953 [translator's note: That's a few weeks after Stalin's death; in 1953 there were mass amnesties, mostly of non-political convicts.] was turned down. The rehabilitation followed in 1955 by the decision of the judicial board on criminal cases of the Supreme Court of the USSR. We are not aware of N.I. Varshavskiy's further fate.

Varshavskiy's choice to participate in the active anarchist struggle seems to have been a conscious decision. He started his active participation as a grown-up, mature family man, and at the most unfavourable time for the anarchists at that. After seeing from his personal experience that under a totalitarian regime, legal work becomes absurd, he came to accept the necessity of underground work.²² Quick defeat in the struggle, lack of perspectives for the movement and probably worry for his family contributed to his moving away from anarchism. Probably the most important reason for his disillusionment in anarchism was disillusionment in anarchists. His friends seemed to have come to ideas that weren't very far from Bolshevism. He didn't slander himself or anyone else

²⁰ Ibid. L. 21, 24, 27.

²¹ Ibid. L. 49, 56, 60, 62.

²² Ibid. L. 41.

I started to rethink my views on the fortunes of anarchy, and after long meditations I came to the conclusion that its idea proved to be impracticable.”¹⁶ After serving out his gaol sentence in 1930 he was internally exiled to Siberia for three years.

Upon his return to Moscow in 1933 Varshavskiy got a job as work superintendent at construction sites. In this period he didn't associate with any of the anarchists that he was previously acquainted with, with the exception of the Italian anarchist émigré Francesco Ghezzi who lived in Odintsovo in the Moscow region and once came to visit Varshavskiy. In September 1942 Varshavskiy was drafted to the Red Army and until October 1945 he served as military clerk and loader in the rear units of the North-West, Leningrad and later Far Eastern fronts. He ended the war as a private, and was awarded with a medal “For the Victory over Germany.” After the war he worked as construction chief at the Ozeretskiy state farm, then as senior engineer at the MOSPO major construction works department.

On September 22, 1949 Varshavskiy, like many others who were previously gaoled under article 58 of the RSFSR Criminal Code, was rearrested and charged with “active anti-soviet work.”¹⁷ During a search of his apartment books on theory and history of anarchism he kept since the 1920s were discovered and confiscated: Lev Chorniy's “On Classes” (published in 1919) and A. Borovoi and N. Otverzheniy's “The Bakunin Myth” (published in 1925).¹⁸ The materials of the case expose the investigator's attempts to force Varshavskiy into confessing about his “anti-soviet activities.” But he maintained categorically that he didn't undertake any since his conviction in 1927 and has no connections to the anarchists.¹⁹ It seems that Varshavskiy was subjected to the many standard pressure methods during the investigation. Suffice to say that the in-

¹⁶ GARF. F. 10035. Op. 1. D. P-30827. L. 26.

¹⁷ Ibid. L. 2.

¹⁸ Ibid. L. 18.

¹⁹ Ibid. L. 22 ob., 31.

Down with the executioners' governments! Down with the state, the capital and the gaols!

Raise higher the black flag of struggle for anarchy, for economic equality, for the destruction of unemployment, for free organisations of the city and the village – trade unions and co-operatives independent from the state.

Long live anarchy!

*A group of anarchists.*¹¹

We reproduce the text of the leaflet from the typewritten copy that was included with Varshavskiy's investigation case when he was re-arrested in 1949. He maintained then that he made eight typewritten copies of the leaflet. It is not very clear whether Varshavskiy's actions were a part of prepared campaign by the Moscow anarchists. Neither it is known if the other anarchists in Moscow knew about the leaflet, or if they attempted to copy and distribute it. The materials of Varshavskiy's archive investigation case do not contain any information regarding the distribution of the leaflet in Moscow. In his testimony to the investigators both in 1927 and in 1949 Varshavskiy maintained that he didn't distribute the leaflet in Moscow and didn't inform any of the Moscow anarchists about his plans. He absolutely refused to say whose typewriter was used to make copies of the leaflet. Vladimir Barmash, who was also interrogated in connection with the Varshavskiy case in 1927, denied any connection between the leaflet and the Moscow anarchists.

Judging by Varshavskiy's further actions, he attempted to establish connection with the anarchists in the South of the country. During his summer vacation he went to Odessa where on August 22 he visited the well-known anarchist Olga Ilyinichna Taratuta whom he met, according to his testimony during investigation,

¹¹ GARF. F. 10035. Op. 1. D. P-30827. L. 38.

back at the Kiev anarchist club. He discussed the contents of the leaflet with her and left two copies to duplicate and distribute. Why did Varshavskiy had to get in touch with Taratuta isn't very clear. Perhaps he was acting on a commission from the Moscow anarchists, namely Barmash and Petrosova with whom he was closer than with the other comrades. Perhaps it was due to the fact that Olga Ilyinichna, old revolutionary and Tsarist-era political convict commanded a lot of respect among anarchists, and due to her break with the Political Convicts' Society as a protest against the Bolshevik domination of its structures, had a reputation as a non-conformist. In any case, Varshavskiy sought her approval and advice: "Taratuta commanded much authority among anarchists, and that's exactly why I decided to ask her for advice."¹²

Varshavskiy, as an active anarchist, was probably tailed since the moment he left Moscow. The circumstances of his all too quick arrest point to that. He intended to go to Kiev from Odessa. Right after talking to Taratuta he went to the train station where he was arrested [translator's note: A day before Sacco and Vanzetti were executed! That leaflet does ring true.]. During arrest the remaining six copies of the leaflet were found on him, as well as a note from one "Dvof" to "Aron."¹³

Varshavskiy refused to co-operate with the investigation when he was interrogated. Besides refusing to say who helped him type up the leaflet in Moscow, he refused to disclose the name of his acquaintance with whom he wanted to meet in Odessa, disclose who "Dvof" and "Aron" (mentioned in the note that was taken from him) were and tried to shield Taratuta. He insisted that he visited her by accident, as an old friend, and didn't discuss anarchism or leaflets with her. He maintained that he only brought with him the leaflets that were confiscated from him at the train station. He also denied

¹² Ibid. L. 22.

¹³ This note and its contents are mentioned in the copies of the 1927 Varshavskiy examination record. But neither the note itself nor a copy thereof are included with the case.

having any criminal plans against the authorities and said that the leaflets were written by him with no purpose to distribute them but exclusively "from the mood." Even after the Odessa GPU searched Taratuta's home and confiscated the two remaining leaflets, Varshavskiy maintained his line of defense and insisted that he didn't know how the leaflets he typed up ended up with Taratuta. Some of Varshavskiy's statements to the investigators seem pretty naïve and unprepared. For example, he claimed: "I have no relation to the meeting whatsoever, I went with Barmash [to the Administrative department of the Moscow soviet. – D.R.] because I was idle."¹⁴ Varshavskiy was taken to Moscow and on December 23, 1927 was sentenced by a decision of the Special Council attached to the OGPU on article 58–10 of the RSFSR Criminal Code to three years in ITL ['corrective-labour camp'].¹⁵ He served his sentence at the Suzdal political isolator. The Moscow anarchists seems to have informed the comrades abroad about Varshavskiy's arrest because in 1928, while at the political isolator, he received two small postal money orders from the French anarchists. According to his testimony, during his gaol time Varshavskiy moved away from active participation in anarchist organisations. His words suggest that it was due to the sympathies of the Moscow anarchists in the Barmash group for the ideas of Makhno and Arshinov's "Platform" which advocated creation of an anarchist party, the role of which in the workers' movement they understood in almost the same way as the Bolsheviks. The ideological evolution of the comrades he respected, their aspiration to create a centralised party organisation were in Varshavskiy's eyes an evidence of failure of anarchism: "Later I continued standing on anarchist positions but after meeting Barmash, Khudolei and Kharkhardin again in 1929 at the political isolator and finding out that they support creating an anarchist party, which didn't correspond with my convictions,

¹⁴ GARF. F. 10035. Op. 1. D. P-30827. L. 43.

¹⁵ ITL (Ispravitelno-trudoviye lagerya) – Corrective labour camps.