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Nikiforova, Marusya, 1885-1919

Nick Heath

June 19, 2006

Born at Alexandrovsk, (now Zaphorozhye) in 1885 Maria Grigorevna Nikiforova was a worker, who had jobs as a baby sitter, sales clerk, and finally as a bottle washer in a vodka distillery. As a member of a local anarchist-communist group she was condemned to death for armed attacks on the Czarist authorities in 1905, commuted to twenty years hard labour and imprisonment. She spent part of the sentence in the Petropavlovsk prison in Petrograd. Transferred to Siberia, she organised a riot in the Narymsk prison and escaped in 1910, passing like Bakunin, from Japan, to the USA. A group of Chinese anarchists living in Japan helped with her passage to the USA. In New York she made contact with the large number of anarchist exiles there and apparently wrote articles for the anarchist press. Around 1912 she moved to western Europe, and settled in Paris. She spent some time in Spain and was involved in armed actions with the local movement.

She married the Polish anarchist Witold Bzhostek there. She attended a conference of Russian anarchist communists in London at the end of 1913. With the outbreak of war, she adopted the po-

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sition of Kropotkin and others in supporting the allies. Arriving in Russia with the revolution, she addressed the Kronstadt sailors on several occasions alongside I. S. Bleikhman during the July Days and it was partly thanks to her that thousands of them marched in Petrograd during this period of near-revolution.

She returned in July 1917 to Alexandrovsk. There the anarchists were all manual or intellectual workers. They were divided into anarchist communists and anarchist individualists, but according to Ukrainian anarchist guerrilla leader Nestor Makhno, this was pure form, and in reality they were all revolutionary anarchist communists. They created an Anarchist Federation in early June and began to carry out an intense activity among the workers.

In August 1917 she and her armed detachment robbed a military storehouse at Orikhiv station, then attacking a regiment in the town, capturing it and dispersing it, and executing all captured officers. Part of the arms and ammo captured were passed over to the Makhno band.

She spoke to a meeting of peasants chaired by Makhno at Gulyai Polye on 29th August 1917. She accompanied Makhno and Antonov of the Gulyai Polye anarchist communist group on a visit to the Alexandrovsk factories over the course of several days in 1917 to expose the counter-revolutionary activity carried out in the workers' name in the villages by the Kerensky regime. She was secretly arrested on the third night by the Socialist Revolutionary Popov and the governmental commissar Mikhno, for having accompanied the Gulyai Polye anarchists without having been mandated by the peasants. Their agents found where she was living, seized her and took her by car to prison.

The following morning the Alexandrovsk workers found out about the arrest, stopped work and marched in formation, banners flying, to the Soviet of Workers and Peasants Deputies. They seized the social-democrat Motchalnyi, the president of the Soviet, elected a commission and made Motchalnyi go to the prison with them to free Nikiforova. On her release the workers passed her

from group to group, carrying her in triumph to the Soviet. None of the commissars dared speak on the platform there. Nikiforova in her powerful voice called on the workers to take up struggle against the government, for the Revolution and for a society free of all authority.

Her intense revolutionary activity won her a commendation in 1918 from the Bolshevik General Antonov-Ovseenko!

Again in January 1918 she used her great talents as an orator. When detachments of Don Cossacks were about to join the counter-revolutionary White Army of Kaledin, they were intercepted by revolutionary forces including those of Nikiforova. They surrendered en masse.

Following this, they were addressed by anarchists, including by Nikiforova, who explained their role under the old regime and the possibilities that they could grasp with a free society. Many Cossacks began to cry like children. Some intellectuals heard listening to the speech remarked "My God, how pale and pitiful the speeches of the Revolutionary Committee and the political parties alongside the speeches of the anarchists and above all that of Mariussa Nikiforova". Thanks to this, quite a few Don Cossacks established a long correspondence with the anarchists and subscribed to the anarchist press. The armed detachment she formed hunted down Army officers and landlords.

She later moved to Elizavetgrad organising another armed detachment-the Free Combat Druzhina- which fought against all invaders including the Germans and Denikin and engaged in two weeks of street fighting with reactionary elements in the town. She linked to the Makhno movement in 1919. Judged too turbulent by Moscow she was banned from exercising responsibilities for a year, in January 1919, cut to 6 months by Kamenev after his visit to Makhno at Gulyai Polye in May 1919 (She had been previously put on trial by the Bolsheviks in Taganrog in April 1918 for similar charges of insubordination and pillage, from which she was acquitted). Peaceful tasks not satisfying her, she took up

armed struggle again. She then went to Berdyansk and organised a new armed detachment which included her husband. She and Bzhostek was finally apprehended by the Whites in Sevastopol whilst preparing for an attack. They were tried on September 16th 1919, and shot.