

Life of Olga Taratuta and Anna Stepanova

NoBonzo

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Olga Taratuta was born as Elka Ruvinskaya into a Jewish family of a shopkeeper in 1876 in the village of Novodmitrovka, part of the Ekaterinoslav governate of the Russian Empire. She became one of the most significant figures of Russian anarchism spanning two generations of organizing and come to be known as the Grandmother of Russian anarchism. After her early schooling she trained to be a teacher and later transitioned to metal work. Her first arrest came at the age of 19 for “political suspicion” though she was released.

She joined the Social Democrats of Elisavetgrad in 1897 and participated in their committees and the South Russian Workers Union until 1901 when avoiding arrest she fled to live in Germany and Switzerland. It was here she met Lenin, her future jailer and executioner, as she worked alongside him on the Marxist text *Iskra*. *Iskra* was a project of the Social Democrat Labour Party of which Lenin along with Potresov and Martov saw themselves as a three man team who would lead their generation to revolution. The paper had to be smuggled into Russia at the time.

It was in the pages of the *Iskra* that Plekhanov attacked Lenin, predicting the man’s future, projecting that Lenin would use “the Central Committee everywhere liquidates the elements with which it is dissatisfied, everywhere seats its own creatures and, filling all the committees with these creatures, without difficulty guarantees itself a fully submissive majority at the congress. The congress, constituted of the creatures of the Central Committee, amiably cries Hurrah!, approves all its successful and unsuccessful actions, and applauds all its plans and initiatives.” Eventually, Lenin left the paper to create his own Bolshevik press.

In 1903 Olga joined a group of anarchists in Geneva and marry Alexander Taratuta, taking his last name. The two travelled back to Odessa at the beginning of 1904, the call of anarchism too strong to stay away. She and her husband joined the Union of the Irreconcilables with her sister Kahyla, a year her junior, and her sisters husband Kopel Moiseyevich Erdelevsky in 1903. The group organized underground printing houses and laboratories to make their bombs. On April 12th of 1904 the police raided and arrested 39 of their 80 members and destroy both their printing houses and literature. They regrouped from this attack into the South Russian Group of Anarchist Communists, the Rebel, then Bread and Freedom.

By Autumn their membership came back up to about 70 people and they had several hundred sympathizers. After a trip to Bialystok, Olga helped to establish an Odessa wing of the Black Banner. The Irreconcilables had met the anarchists of Bialystok when a member had traveled to Odessa in search of aid for printing money after hearing of the group. Itsjok Blejer stowed away

on a train to Odessa and slept in parks for three days while he searched for the anarchists. After three days he encountered an anarchist he knew from Bialystok who had moved to Odessa and joined the Irreconcilables. He was warmly welcomed and given money and literature to aid the Bialystok anarchists in their endeavours.

Before her arrest for the Liebman cafe bombing, she was also arrested in 1904 but released due to a distinct lack of evidence. Then again in October 1905 but released under the October amnesty as a result of the revolution that same year. Khayla had been arrested in January 1905 during a search of Olga's quarters and not released until April. Both sisters as prominent anarchists were subject to much scrutiny. When the Liebman attack happened, Olga's 17 year sentence to hard labour came as no surprise, though she soon escaped in December of 1906. Running madly and bravely from the Odessa prison to the border, helped by her husband Alexander.

Kahyla this same year was sentenced to the death penalty for fighting in the armed resistance along with one of her comrades from the Black Banner Lev Tarlo, though her sentence was commuted to 20 years hard labour. The tsarists government of Bloody Nicholas had established a prison for women "terrorists" in eastern Siberia, Maltsev Prison, located in a remote mining district near the border with China. Her husband who had been arrested as well, died in 1908 when he took his own life after a many hours siege where police attempted to arrest him after two successful prison breaks. Though Kahyla was released in 1911 due to a diagnosis of epilepsy, she was sent to a settlement with her fate becoming unknown.

1906 saw some of the most active agitating from the anarchists of Odessa. They helped to form over 50 peasant organizations country wide and participated in joining the labor collectives of port workers and sailors. They organized strikes and held a line of utterly and unapologetic militant resistance. When a shipping company leadership tried to break the strike using members of the ultra nationalist Black-Hundreds (Union of the Russian People) who were the organizers of many pogroms on the Jewish population of Odessa, as scabs, they simply blew up a whole steamer. During Olga's time in Odessa, she also threw bombs at the Black-Hundreds.

The Yekaterinoslav Anarchists who Olga and her sister had organized with issued this statement in the year

"Comrade workers!

We strongly believe that you will come to replenish our numbers, do not remain deaf to our call:

if you do not hear our propaganda in word, then our propaganda in deed will be heard, because our voice is the booming voice of browning, bomb, dynamite, hell machine.

Respond to violence with violence! Death to bloodsuckers-the bourgeois and its bloodthirsty dog-every government.

Eternal memory to the fallen freedom fighters.

Long live terror!

Long Live the Social Revolution!

Long live stateless socialism- Anarcho-Communism!"

For Olga, she had ran from the Odessa prison across borders to Geneva and back to Switzerland. There she joined the Buntar (Mutineers) formed by her almost Liebman co-defendent who

had escaped to Switzerland, Erdelevskii, and edited the paper of the same name along with Alexander. She joined the Fighting International Detachment of Anarchist Communists, the first militant anarchist group in Switzerland. Here she reconnected with Rozalia Moiseyevna Tarlo, the mother of the anarchist Lev I. Tarlo murdered in 1907. Lev had been part of the same Black Banner organization Olga and her sister had belonged to in Odessa, organizing fighting detachments, bravely taking many risks before being captured and executed by the Tsarist forces. After the murder of her son, Rozalia had made it her life goal to take revenge. She and Olga returned to Odessa in 1907.

Olga went back to her work of planning and participating in expropriations and political assassinations joined by Rozalia and many others. The group even planning to target the commander of the Odessa military and its Governor, along with an explosion at the Odessa tribunal. Taratuta began her long career in aiding anarchist prisoners when she began plans to create an explosion in the Lukyanovka prison in Kiev and the escape of its many incarcerated. Sadly, she was arrested in December 1908 in Yekaterinoslav with a bag full of hand bombs and sentenced to 21 years in prison in Lukyanovskaya prison.

Rozalia was also arrested in 1908. The Black Banner group had had a police informant who turned her in. She sat for almost two years in prison before being released on lack of evidence. However, the informant, police agent Boris Chizikov came to an end May 25th, 1908 when he was killed in Geneva by the brother of a prominent anarchist. His position of trust within anarchist circles had given him the standing necessary to send many brave young people to Tsarist executioners and prisons.

Olga did not escape from the Lukyanovskaya and served nine years until the February Revolution freed thousands and thousand across the country. She emerged heart broken. Her child had been torn from her and had begun to grow up a stranger. Much of the old movement was gone. Many of her dear friends had paid with their lives. Her sister lost. Her brother-in-law dead. The strategies and tactics were changing too. Many of the current anarchists decried the terrorism of the past generation. Through 1912–1917 the anarchist syndicalists had been the main anarchists group to survive. Olga took months to herself to reflect and think, spending time with her son.

After a few months of rest Olga could no longer ignore the conditions in Ukraine, especially the brutality of Pavlo Skoropadsky. As a result of the February Revolution Pavlo, an aristocrat and military leader had seized power through a coup d'etat in Ukraine to become Hetman, a title used for military leaders and commanders. The coup had been sanctioned by the German Imperial Army and Pavlo was targeting Bolsheviks, anarchists, workers, peasants, and revolutionaries. She spent two years in Kiev working to support all victims of political terror.

Olga returned to organizing with the Anarchist Red Cross, the explicit Anarchist support group that had formed out of the Political Red Cross. The PRC formed in 1881 in response to the repression of the tsarists regime who supported all political prisoners regardless of their tendency. Though the Political Red Cross was supposed to support all prisoners, it wasn't long before the Bolsheviks had taken control of the organization and funds dwindled to non Bolshevik prisoners. The anarchists in response formed the Anarchist Red Cross to continue to ensure their comrades and others received support.

The exact date ARC formed is unknown but it came somewhere between 1905 and 1907 quickly forming to an international aid organization. It carried out the mission initially intended by the Political Red Cross and supported all social revolutionaries, rather than just the preferred brand of political ideology practiced by the people holding its purse strings.

For Olga it was of the utmost importance that prisoners were not forgotten, and provided with food, money, letters, pressure for their release, and shelter on their exit. Just as she had worked in the Tsarist regime she continued under the Bolshevik one as well, going on to save or directly support hundreds and hundreds of prisoners across all political tendencies including the communists who came to be her jailers.

In June of 1920, she went to Ukraine and was elected to the secretariat of the Nabat, worked with Golos Truda, and became an elected representative of the Makhnovists in Kharkov. She often travelled to and from Kharkov to the Makhnovists camps and was much respected by Makhno. She was given 5 Million Rubles to begin the Ukrainian Anarchist Red Cross, which was renamed the Black Cross, and was promised in her role she received a wide berth and support from the Bolshevik. Their repression against the anarchists had been mounting. Through constant transfers they made it difficult to track prisoners and the conditions were unspeakably brutal. The ABC tracked, supported, and helped in the escapes planned by their incarcerated friends.

The Black Cross in Ukraine had unique characteristics different from many other Black Cross chapters, and were also organized along the lines of self defense and medical units. During times of active violence in the streets, members often distinguished themselves through wearing overalls and an arm band. They were never at the defensive level of the rebel insurgent army, but could be counted on to immediately organize a defensive unit when a threat appeared in their town.

One of her prominent co-organizers was Anna Ivanovna Stepanova, who was of her same generation and started as a teacher as well. Born in the Ekaterinoslav region in 1885 she joined the Black Banner and was arrested in 1908 for which she was sentenced in 1911 to four years hard labour. Her sentence was extended and she was released only after the February Revolution. She had suffered ongoing tuberculous and had seen her husband brutally murdered before her eyes, but she threw herself into political support work alongside Olga for which they both faced ongoing persecution.

Olga, along with so many others, was arrested during the Cheka raid at the Kharkov conference on April 26th. Stepanova was arrested a few months later in November and sent into exile. Just one of the hundreds and hundreds of betrayals from the Bolsheviks. The Black Cross's center was targeted and destroyed. Makhno's headquarters and the Golos Truda raided. Olga was beaten alongside Fanya and Leah in the Butyrki prison and transferred to the Ryazan with them. In January 1921 she along with 40 others were transported to Moscow, and on February 13th, she emerged from the prison for a day to carry Kropotkin's coffin to his final resting place.

In May of 1921, the Soviets offered to release her for venerable age. She had been in her forties at the time of the February revolution and described by her friends as a gray haired lioness. Already adopting the nickname "babushka" or grandmother. Her release would only come if she made a statement of refusal to take action but she indignantly refused. A hard choice. She had been separated from her son again and he was ever on her mind. When comrades were doing a tour to write about the horrifying conditions of the gulags they met Olga at the Orel Central prison and write.

“...and here is Olga Taratuta, an old revolutionary terrorist, gray like a lioness, one of the representatives of the terror which as strongly developed in Southern Russia in 1905–1906. She was doing penal servitude when the Revolution came. Always courageous, jovial, her cheerfulness concealed in the wrinkles of her face a very poignant

yearning. We knew one ailing string of her heart which we always avoided touching. She had a son, a grown-up boy. She lived very little with him; he grew up in her absence. How many times perhaps the heart of the mother would yearn toward her son.

Serving a long, long penal sentence, she hid in her soul the hope of seeing him, of living near him for awhile. In the penal prison, enveloped in the darkness of suffering, the anxious question would trouble her: Would he forgive, would he understand her noble aspirations, would he not damn the Revolution in the name of which his mother had “deserted” him? We learned that this did not occur.”

In Orel Central she participated in prisoner organizing against the brutal conditions. She took part in a hunger strike of 11 days to protest. It is during this strike that her friend and comrade Aron Baron was told of the murder of his beloved wife Fanya and his brother. The strike secured no results and conditions were not to improve. Olga developed a severe scurvy and lost almost all of her teeth. She later wrote that a year and a half in a Soviet prison had taken more of her life than ten years of hard labour in a Tsarist prison camp.

In 1922 she and Stepanova were deported to Voldoga in exile and released in 1924 where they moved to Kiev and joined the Society of Former Political Prisoners and Exiled Settlers. As part of the society they enjoyed a small stipend and the shared solidarity with other members. The Society was supposed to be a place where former political prisoners and exiles were welcome, operating autonomously and outside of any official party.

Sadly, the society soon came under the command of the Bolshevik and members were asked to sign commitments to various Bolshevik organizations. Articles began to be included in their declaration which led to the exclusion of some former political and exiles. Olga wrote a letter condemning and refusing to be part of the organization to which Stepanova signed onto and they both left. Both believed in the founding statement and aims of the Society, horrified to find it coming under the command of an authoritarian party. Olga’s letter ended with

“To the communist members of society I would like to remind them once again, that in the means of asserting themselves today, they have forgotten about tomorrow.

History is not made by them alone, though they try to seize it, and history does not end with them, even though they mount their horse victorious.

A distant but bright star, now dimmer behind the clouds, now re-emerging, a great revolution is coming to us, and victoriously it will come.

Once again the idea of a Society of the Political Convicts and Exile Prisoners in its original beauty and life has been suffocated in the grip of partisanship.

The living, powerful voice of the true history of the past revolutionary movement will once again ring out. History will take you to the pages of our past. History will also mark the emergence and spiritual death of our Society of Former Political Convicts and Exile Prisoners.

The Communist members of the Society will be marked with the seal of Cain-the Cains, the murderers of morals, and the murderers of their best comrades in the movement and the struggle against the enemies of the revolution yesterday and in the struggle for the coming tomorrow...”

After leaving the society, the two travelled to Kiev. Stepanova fell ill and Olga carefully took care of her until her death on October 27th, 1925. She wrote an article about her dear friend at the time and contributed an article on the conditions of the Lukyanka prison published in the book *Kartoga and Exile: The History of the Revolutionary Movement in Russia* published in 1924. She was arrested again in the middle of the year for continuing to distribute anarchist propaganda, but soon released.

From here she moved to Odessa in 1927. With leaflets appearing in the city advocating for various anarchist points, Olga was detained, but soon released for lack of evidence. When the arrest and prosecution of Sacco and Vanzetti occurred, outrage swept the worldwide community of anarchists. The Bureau of Anarchists for the Protection of Sacco and Vanzetti was illegally established in Moscow, and Olga was in correspondence with them. The anarchist N. Varshavsky travelled from Moscow to Odessa on September 22nd and meet with Olga, giving her many leaflets made by the bureau. The leaflet had included a call to decry the ongoing repression of anarchists by the Bolshevik, and they were quickly criminalized by the Bolshevik.

The next day, Olga's apartment was searched and Varshavsky was arrested, charged with being an "anarchist activist," and sentenced to three years. Olga was released but demanded her arrest in solidarity and protest for the treatment of Varshavsky. According to state surveillance at the time, she was considered valuable for gaining information on other anarchists and their activities so the choose not to arrest her. She wrote a piece condemning the prosecution of Vashavsky.

"While you are trying to exterminate all the Anarchists without sense or reason, why do you go about it in such an underhand and cowardly manner? If you are convinced that it is right for you to let all the Anarchists-idealists rot and die in prison, why do you get so excited when some one speaks about these facts or publishes them in the papers? If the Anarchist Appeal (the Sacco and Vanzetti leaflet) is criminal, then why don't you arrest me for it? If the two copies of the Appeal found in my possession are not criminal, then why did you arrest those two comrades who, as you well know, had nothing to do with the publication and distribution of that leaflet?"

"The shameful practice of the continuous persecution of Anarchists during the past ten years has stamped you as criminals even from the viewpoint of the law which you yourselves have made. On the basis of what paragraph of your Criminal Code have you the right to keep those two Anarchists in prison now for six weeks, without having brought any charge whatever against them? You pretend that you arrested them in connection with some other matter, but it is a lie and you know it! Your purpose and methods are too obvious. The contents of the Appeal do not justify you in arresting Olga Taratuta, because you know that her arrest for it would cause too much protest in Russia as well as abroad. But because you are afraid of the effect the 'Appeal' may have among the Russian masses, you revenge yourselves by arresting two innocent victims.

"I herewith declare to you most emphatically that your action is so contemptible and outrageous that it must be made known to the masses. I announce to you that I will use every means in my power to inform the workers about the matter. Full well I realize the consequences of this, my declaration. But remember that the methods employed by the Tsar failed to accomplish their purposes. Neither will you succeed

in killing ideas by bullet and prison. As concerns myself, it is the same to me whether you put me into the smaller prison or leave me in the large one into which you have turned Soviet Russia.”

It was due to this repression of anarchist thought that Olga had organized a smuggling system of anarchist literature and publications in and out of the Soviet Union. She had established an illegal channel via the Soviet and Polish border near Rovno. The corridor was used by anarchists all over. Smuggling literature and letters to Ukraine, Moscow, Leningrad, Kursk, the Volga region and more. One of the few lifelines under Bolshevik domination. She used the corridor herself to write in avocation for the support of anarchist imprisoned by the Bolsheviks.

In 1927 she spoke at a memorial in dedication of Lev Tarlo so brutally murdered 20 years beforehand. Lev Tarlo’s remains had been moved from the prison cemetery and properly respectfully interred to the Second Jewish Cemetery. It was a solemn ceremony attended by approximately 20 anarchists. The brave young man she had fought alongside 20 years beforehand finally being openly mourned and celebrated, though under the scrutiny of secret police who recorded the event, attended by many dozens of anarchists.

In 1929 she moved back to Odessa where she was arrested again for two years, this time for helping to organize among rail workers. After her release in 1931 she then moved to Moscow where in her old age, health destroyed, she worked in a metal working plant as a drill operator. 6 years later she was arrested again and charged with the vague anti-Soviet activities. On February 8th, 1938, she was tried, sentenced to death, and shot in the same day.

From Anatolli Gorelik, who survived Russia to escape to Buenos Aires

Olga Taratuta belongs to the best of the old revolutionaries: She will not allow herself to be humiliated before the powers that be or the rulers.

She cannot, under any circumstances, succumb.

She is always proud, independent, with a strong character and an iron nature, as befits a woman of timeless honour. And for that alone, the Russian “communist” overlords decided to suppress and destroy her: it is only because of this that they have been starving, freezing, and poisoning her in their socialist prisons for more than a year now...

Such is the fate of our comrades in Russia.

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Retrieved on 30th January 2023 from abc-belarus.org
In this historical essay, we want to introduce you to the stories of two women activists of the
ABC who stood at the foundation of the organized anarchist solidarity structure.

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