

Emma Goldman

The Tragedy of the Political Exiles

1934

During my ninety days in the United States old friends and new, including people I had never met before, spoke much of my years in exile. It seemed incredible to them that I had been able to withstand the vicissitudes of banishment and come back unbroken in health and spirit and with my ideal unmarred. I confess I was deeply moved by their generous tribute. But also I was embarrassed, not because I suffer from false modesty or believe that kind things should be said about people only after their death, but rather because the plight of hosts of political exiles scattered over Europe is so tragic that my struggle to survive was hardly worth mentioning.

The lot of political refugees, even prior to the war, was never free from stress and poverty. But they could at least find asylum in a number of countries. France, Belgium, Switzerland were open to them. Scandinavia and the Netherlands received them kindly. Even the United States was hospitable enough to admit some refugees. The real haven, however, was England, where political rebels from all despotic lands were made welcome.

The world carnage put an end to the golden era when a Bakunin and a Herzen, a Marx and a Kropotkin, a Malatesta and a Lenin, Vera Sazulich, Louise Michel, and all the others could come and go without hindrance. In those days who cared about passports or visas? Who worried about one particular spot on earth? The whole world was one's country. One place was as good as another where one could continue one's work for the liberation of one's autocratic native land. Not in their wildest dreams did it occur to these revolutionaries that the time might come when the world would be turned into a huge penitentiary, or that political conditions might become more despotic and inhuman than during the worst period of the Czars. The war for democracy and the advent of the left and right dictatorships destroyed whatever freedom of movement political refugees had formerly enjoyed. Tens of thousands of men, women, and children have been turned into modern Ahasueruses, forced to roam the earth, admitted nowhere. If they are fortunate enough to find asylum, it is nearly always for a short period only; they are always exposed to annoyance and chicanery, and their lives made a veritable hell.

For a time expatriated Russians were given some protection by means of the Nansen, or League of Nations, passport. Most countries were supposed to recognize that scrap of paper, though few did, least of all when politically tainted individuals applied for admission. Still, the Nansen passport was better than nothing at all. Now this too has been abolished, and Russian refugees are entirely outside the law. Terrible as was the Czarist time, it was yet possible to bribe one's way across frontiers. That is possible no longer, not because border police have suddenly become honest, but because every country is afraid of the bolshevik or

the fascist germ and keeps the frontier hermetically sealed, even against those who hate every form of dictatorship.

I have already stated that political exiles are sometimes lucky enough to find an abode, but that by no means includes the right to work. Anything they do to eke out a wretched existence, such as lessons, translations, or any kind of physical labor, must be done furtively. Should they be caught, it would again mean the wearisome round of seeking another country. Politicals are constantly at the beck and call of the authorities. It is almost a daily occurrence for them to be pounced upon suddenly at an early morning hour, dragged out of bed, taken to the police station, and then expelled. It is not necessary to be guilty of any offense, such as participation in the internal political affairs of the country whose hospitality they have accepted.

A friend of mine is a case in point. He was expelled from a certain country merely for editing a small bulletin in English in order to raise funds for the Russian political prisoners. After we succeeded in bringing him back, he was three times ordered to leave, and when he was finally allowed to remain, it was on condition that he apply for a renewal of the permit every three months. For days and weeks he had to camp at the police station and waste time and health running from department to department. While waiting for the renewal he could not leave the city of his domicile. Every new place he might want to visit implied new registration, and as he was left without a single document while his renewal was pending, he could nowhere be registered. In other words, my friend was virtually a prisoner in one city until the renewal was granted. Few there are who could have survived such treatment. But my friend had been steeled in American prisons for sixteen years, and his had always been an indomitable will. Yet even he had almost come to the end of his endurance when the three months' renewal period was extended to six.

However, these miseries are by no means the only tragedies in the present plight of most political refugees. There are many more that try their souls and turn their lives into hideous nightmares. No matter how great their suffering in pre-war times, they had their faith and their work to give them an outlet. They lived, dreamed, and labored incessantly for the liberation of their native lands. They could arouse public opinion in their place of refuge against the tyranny and oppression practiced in their country, and they were able to help their comrades in prison with large funds contributed by the workers and liberal elements in other parts of the world. They could even ship guns and ammunition into Czarist Russia, despotic Italy, and Spain. These were certainly inspiring and sustaining factors. Not less so was the solidarity that existed among the politicals of different schools. Whatever their theoretical differences, there was mutual respect and

confidence among them. And in times of important issues they worked together, not in a make-believe but in a real united front.

Nothing of that is left. All political movements are at each other's throats — more bitter, vindictive, and downright savage against each other than they are against their common enemies. The most unpardonable offender in this respect is the so-called Union of Socialist Soviet Republics. Not only is it keeping up a process of extermination of all political opponents in and outside its territory, but it is also engaged in wholesale character assassination. Men and women with a heroic record of revolutionary activity, persons who have consecrated themselves to their ideals, who went through untold sufferings under the Romanovs, are maligned, misrepresented, dubbed with vile names, and hounded without mercy. It is certainly no coincidence that my friend was expelled for a bulletin designed to raise money for the Russian politicals.

To be sure the Mussolinis and Hitlers are guilty of the same crime. They and their propaganda machines mow down every political opponent in their way. They also have added character assassination to the butchery of their victims. Human sensibilities have become dulled since the war. If the suffering of the German and Austrian refugees had failed to rekindle the dying embers of sympathy, one would have had to lose all faith in mankind. The generous response to their need is indeed the only ray of light on the black social horizon.

The Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists have, of course, been forgotten. Or is it ignorance that causes the deadly silence about their plight? Do not the protesters against German atrocities know that Anarchists also are in Göring's dreadful concentration camps, subject to the brutalities of the Storm Troop barbarians, and that some of them have undergone more heinous punishment than most of the other Nazi victims? For instance, Erich Mühsam. Poet and social rebel, he paid his toll to the German Republic after the Bavarian uprising. He was sentenced to fifteen years in prison, of which he served five. On his release he immediately threw himself into the work of showing the inhuman conditions in the prisons under the Socialist and republican government. Being a Jew and an Anarchist and having a revolutionary past, Erich Mühsam was among the first to be dragged off by the SA gangsters. He was repeatedly slugged and beaten, his teeth were knocked out, his hair and beard pulled, and the swastika cut on his skull with a penknife. After his death in July, announced by the Nazis a "suicide," his widow was shown his tortured body, with the back of the skull crushed as if it had been dragged on the ground, and with unmistakable signs of strangulation.

Indifference to Mühsam's martyrdom is a sign of the sectarianism and bigotry in liberal and radical ranks today. But what I really want to stress is this: the barbarity of fascism and Nazism is being condemned and fought by the persons who have remained perfectly indifferent to the Golgotha of the Russian politicals. And not

only indifferent; they actually justify the barbarities of the Russian dictatorship as inevitable. All these good people are under the spell of the Soviet myth. They lack awareness of the inconsistency and absurdity of their protesting against brutalities in capitalist countries when they are condoning the same brutalities in the Soviet Republic. A recent appeal of the International Workingmen's Association gives a heart-breaking picture of the condition of Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists in Stalin's stronghold. Renewed arrests in Odessa, Tomsk, Archangel, and other parts of Russia have taken place. No charge whatever is made against the victims. Without hearing or trial they have been sent away by the "administrative process." Those whose sentences, some as high as ten years, have expired, have again been sent to isolated parts; there is no hope of liberation during the much-praised Communist experiment.

One of the tragic cases is that of Nicholai Rogdayeve, an Anarchist for years and an ardent fighter for the emancipation of the Russian people. During the reign of the Romanovs, Rogdayeve knew all the agonies meted out to politicals — prison, exile, and *katorga*. After the March revolution Rogdayeve came back to freedom and new activities. With hundreds of others of every political shade he worked untiringly — teaching, writing, speaking, and organizing the workers. He continued his labors for a time after the October revolution. Then the Bolshevik persecution began. Though Rogdayeve was well known and loved by everyone, including even Communists, he did not escape the crushing hand of the GPU. Arrest, exile, and all the other tortures the Russian politicals are made to suffer undermined his health. His giant body was gradually broken by tuberculosis which he had contracted as a result of his treatment. He died a few months ago. What was the offense of Rogdayeve and hundreds of others? It was their steadfast adherence to their ideals, to their faith in the Russian revolution and the Russian masses. For that undying faith they went through a thousand purgatories; many of them, like Rogdayeve, were slowly done to death. Thus, Katherine Breshkovsky, at the age of ninety and blind, has just ended her days in an alien land. Maria Spiridonova, broken in health, if not in spirit, may not go abroad to seek a cure from scurvy developed in the inner Cheka prison; Stalin's sleep might be marred were she at large. And Angelica Balabonov, what about her? Not even the henchmen of Stalin have dared to charge her with having made common cause with the enemies of the revolution. In 1917 she returned from Italy to Russia, joined the Communist Party, and dedicated herself to the Russian Revolution. But eventually, when she realized the intrigue and the corruption in the Third International, when she could no longer accept the ethics of the GPU, she left Russia and the Communist Party. Ever since, Angelica Balabonov has been used as a target for villainous attacks and denunciations from Moscow and its satellites abroad. This and years of malnutrition have left her ill and stranded.

The Russian refugees are not the only rebels whose dream of a new world has been shattered. Enrico Malatesta, Anarchist, rebel, and one of the sweetest personalities in the revolutionary ranks, was also not spared the agony of the advent of fascism. Out of his great mind and his loving heart he had given lavishly over a period of sixty years to free the Italian workers and peasants. The realization of his dream was all but within reach when the riffraff of Mussolini spread like a plague over Italy, destroying everything so painfully built up by men like Malatesta, Fabri, and the other great Italian revolutionists. Bitter indeed must have been the last days of Malatesta.

Within the last year and a half hosts of Austrian and German rebels have been added to the list of radicals from Russia, Italy, Poland, Hungary, Rumania, Jugoslavia, and other lesser countries. All these lands have become the graveyard of revolutionary and libertarian ideals. Few countries are left where one can still hold on to life. Indeed, nothing that the holocaust and its aftermath have brought to humanity can compare with the cruel plight of the political refugees. Yet undying are their faith and their hope in the masses. No shadow of doubt obscures their belief that the workers will wake up from their leaden sleep, that they will once more take up the battle for liberty and well-being.

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May 21, 2012



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Published in The Nation, Oct. 10, 1934.
Retrieved on March 15th, 2009 from sunsite.berkeley.edu