

# The tragic fate of Maria Spiridonova (1884-1941)

Maria Alexandrovna Spiridonova (28.10.1884, Tambov – 11.9.1941, Medvedev Forest, near Orel) Leader of the Left Socialist Revolutionary Party. Born into a noble family of a collegiate secretary. Graduated from Tambov Gymnasium, joined the Social Revolutionary Organization in 1900 – 1901. Worked as an office clerk in the provincial Assembly of the Nobility. In 1905 was arrested for participation in the demonstration, but was released. In 1906 fatally wounded gendarme colonel G.N. Luzhenovskiy, who was sentenced to death by SRists for cruel subduing of peasant unrest. Seized, badly beaten in a police station, cigarettes were put out on her naked body; she was mocked in the car on the way to Tambov by the officers who arrested her. The Spiridonova case was widely publicised and of great social importance. The mobile session of the Moscow District Military Court sentenced Spiridonova to execution by hanging and was commuted to perpetual hard labour which she had to serve at Nerchinsk. She was released in March 1917 under the order of the Minister of Justice A. F. Kerenskii and started active political work in Chita. In May came to Moscow, where she started playing one of the main roles among the leftist social revolutionaries. Joining the Orgbureau of the Left Wing of the Party, worked in the Petrograd organisation, appeared in the military units and among the workers, calling for an end to the war, for the transfer of land to the peasants and for power to the Soviets. Co-operated in the newspaper. «Land and Will”, was editor of the journal “Our Way”, was a member of the

editorial board of the newspaper "Labour's Flag". and made programmatic statements. In October 1917, the Left Socialist Revolutionaries joined the editorial board of the newspaper "Banner of Labour". In October 1917 t became the member of the Petrograd VRK and took an active part in the October Revolution. John Reed call her in his book *Ten Days That Shook World* "the most popular and influential woman in Russia". At the II All-Russian Congress of Soviets they voted for the decrees on peace and on land and together with Spiridonova became a member of the VTsIK. However, V. I. Lenin never succeeded in convincing the Left SRs, including Spiridonova, to become members of the Soviet Government. Believing cooperation with the Bolsheviks to be necessary, as "the masses, brought out of stagnation, follow them", Spiridonova was convinced that the Bolsheviks' influence on the people was short-lived. Brutality and bitterness were justified during the barricade battles in Russia, but were not suitable for the soon-to-be-released world "social revolution", in which the Left SR would take its rightful place. Spiridonova was elected chairman of the Extraordinary and Second All-Russian Peasant Congresses and worked in the Central Executive Committee and in the peasant section of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee. When, in November-Dec. 1917, the left-wing Social Revolutionaries joined the Sovnarkom, thus strengthening the Bolshevik position, Spiridonova did not become People's Commissar only because her work in the Central Executive Committee was deemed more important by the Social Revolutionary leadership. Spiridonova supported Lenin in the conclusion of the Brest Peace Treaty and rejected the calls of those who proposed the outbreak of a revolutionary war against German imperialism. The

split with Bolsheviks occurred because of the decrees of VTsIK in May-June 1918 (on food dictatorship, on kombedes and on death penalty). Spiridonova accused the Bolshevik Central Committee of substituting "socialization" of land with "nationalization", organizing the food wards and the Kombeds. Spiridonova was the last of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries to turn to the political opponents of the Bolsheviks and to oppose the Brest Peace, which she had previously supported. Spiridonova actively participated in leftist social revolution of 6 – 7 of July 1918 and was sent to the guard-house of the Kremlin ("I fought against the tsar for twelve years, and now they put me in the tsar's palace"). She managed to transmit to the will of the "Open Letter to the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party", in which she accused her opponents of destroying the power of the Soviets, the power of the workers, condemned the "red terror" called the policies of Lenin, Sverdlov and Trotsky "genuine counter-revolution". In the open letter to the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party (november 1918) wrote:

*"By your cynical attitude to the power of the Soviets, by your White Guard dispersals of congresses and Soviets and the unpunished arbitrariness of Bolshevik appointees you have placed yourselves in the rebel camp against the Soviet power, the only one in power in Russia.*

*The power of the Soviets, for its chaotic nature, is more and better elected than the entire Constituent Assembly, the Duma and the Zemstvos. The power of the Soviets is an apparatus of self-government of the working masses, which sensitively reflects their will, sentiments and*

needs.

And when every factory, every plant and every village had the right, through the re-election of its Soviet delegate, to influence the work of the state apparatus and protect itself in a general and private sense, this was indeed self-government.

All the arbitrariness and violence, all the sins that are natural in the first attempts of the masses to govern and be governed, are easily cured, because the principle of the people's unlimited election and power over their elected delegate will make it possible to correct their delegate radically, replacing him with the most honest and best known throughout the village and the factory.

And when the working people beat up their Soviet delegate for cheating and stealing, so be it for that delegate, even if he was a Bolshevik, and the fact that in defence of such scoundrels you send artillery to the village, guided by the bourgeois notion of authority, proves that you either do not understand or do not recognize the principle of workers' authority.

And when a man disperses or kills the rapists-designees, that is the red terror, the people's self-defence against the violation of their rights, against oppression and violence.

And if the masses of a given village or factory send a right-wing socialist, let them send it, it is their right, and it is our misfortune that we have failed to earn their trust.

In order for the Soviet power to be barometric,

*responsive and fused with the people, it needs boundless freedom of election, a play of the elements of the people, and then creativity, new life, new dispensation and struggle will be born.*

*Only then will the masses feel that everything that happens is their doing, not someone else's.*

*That it [the masses] are the maker of their own destiny and not somebody else's guardian, benefactor or advocate for them, as in the Constituent Assembly and other parliamentary institutions, and only then will they be capable of limitless exploits.*

*That is why we fought with you when you drove the right-wing socialists out of the Soviets and the CEC.*

*The councils are not only a militant political-economic organisation of the workers, they are also a definite platform.*

*A platform for destroying all the foundations of the bourgeois-serfdom system, and if the right-wing delegates had tried to preserve or defend it in the Soviets, the very nature of this organisation would have broken them, or the people would have thrown them out themselves, not your emergency workers as traitors to their interests.*

*The programme of the October revolution, as it sketched out in the minds of the workers, is still alive in their souls today, and the masses are not betraying themselves, but they are.*

*The disrespect for the workers' election of their delegates and Soviet workers, revealed by the brutal machine-gun arbitrariness that was present*

*even before the July reaction, when you already often rehearsed the dispersal of the Soviet congresses, seeing our strengthening, – will give rich fruit to the right-wing parties.*

*You have so accustomed the people to disenfranchisement, created such skills of uncomplaining submission to all sorts of raids, that the Avenanti's American Krasnov dictatorship can pass like butter.*

*Instead of the free, overflowing, like light, like air, creativity of the people, through the change, the struggle in the councils and congresses, you have appointees, bailiffs and gendarmes from the Communist Party.”*

*In November, 1918 the Supreme Court under VTsIK sentenced Spiridonova for participation in rebellion to a year of prison, but taking into account her “special merits to the revolution” she was amnestied and released. She continued her active political activity against “Bolshevik oligarchy”. In February, 1919 she was arrested again. Under decision of Moscow Revolutionary Tribunal she was isolated from political and public life for a year and sent to Kremlin hospital, from which she escaped with the help of Central Committee of the Revolutionaries and was illegally imprisoned.*

**On October 6, 1920 Spiridonova was arrested , on November 18, 1921 she was released on the guarantee of the SR leaders I. Z. Steinberg and I. Y. Bakal, and an undertaking that she would never engage in political activity. She lived in Malakhovka near Moscow under the supervision of the Cheka. In 1923**

she unsuccessfully tried to escape abroad and was sentenced to 3 years' exile, being held at the OGPU state farm Vorontsovo near Moscow. Then she was in exile in Samarkand (1925-1928) and Tashkent (1928-1930).

In 1931 was sentenced to 3 years' exile. This term, later extended by 5 years, was served in Ufa. She married I.A. Mayorov. In Ufa she lived in a "commune" with her husband, stepson, father-in-law and two of her friends, Irina Kakhovskaya and Aleksandra Izmailovich. She worked in Bashkir office of State Bank.

In 1937 she was arrested in Ufa. The Military Collegium of the USSR Supreme Court found her guilty that Spiridonova "up to the day of her arrest was a member of the United Socialist-Revolutionary Center and with a view of deployment of wide counterrevolutionary terrorist activity organized terrorist and sabotage groups in Ufa, Gorky, Tobolsk, Kuibyshev and other cities...". Closed in Ufa prison and then in Butyr prison in Moscow. The Military Collegium of the USSR Supreme Court sentenced her to 25 years imprisonment. She served her time in Yaroslavl and Orel prisons. On September 11, 1941 the NKVD officers shot her in the Medvedev Forest near Orel along with other 153 political prisoners in the Orel prison (among them her husband Ilya Mayorov, a friend of Alexandra Ismailovich).

Rehabilitated partially in 1988, fully in 1992.

Soucers: Leszczynski Elizabeth Anne. Maria A. Spiridonova. Russian revolutionary. – Saskatoon, 1993.

Гусев К. В. Эсеровская богородица. – М.: Луч, 1992.

Works: «Из воспоминаний о Нерчинской каторге» (М., 1926)