

Torgasheva, Tatiana Tikhonovna (1885-1919)



A short biography of Tatiana Torgasheva, fighter for women's liberation, Bolshevik then anarchist communist

Tatiana Torgasheva was born into a family of poor peasants in 1885 in the village of Ershovo in the Kamyshin district of Russia on the Volga river.

She exhibited a bright intelligence and, after parish school, graduated to a two-year school and short pedagogical courses and then started work as a primary school teacher, first in Ershovo and then in the neighbouring town of Kamyshin, to where she had moved with her family. One of her pupils was Vasili Matushkin, later to be a famous writer. Torgasheva recognised his talent and introduced him to Gorky, Pushkin and Tolstoy.

At the age of seventeen, Tatiana Torgasheva became radicalised and together with her brother Stepan, joined the circle of progressive youth, which produced the underground paper Freedom. Six hand written issues were produced, which talked about the coming revolution and radical change. She had a leading role in its production.

By 1905 various small Marxist circles united in the Kamyshin United Social Democratic Organisation, a component of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), representing its Bolshevik tendency. Chief among the organisers were Nikolai Sorokin and Ivan Bakayev (the latter was shot as a member of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Centre on August 25th, 1936). Tatiana herself joined the RSDLP.

On the afternoon of August 26th, news spread that 58 political prisoners were being brought by train to the Kamyshin prison. On the following morning the train with the prisoners arrived at Kamyshin station. A large crowd, organised by the local Bolsheviks, surrounded the prison convoy. Horse guards began to use their whips, the crowd responded with stones, and then the guards opened fire on the unarmed crowd., killing one man.

Rallies called by the RSDLP and the Socialist Revolutionaries were followed by the building of barricades. Tatiana Torgasheva was heavily involved in the uprising. She was involved in the looting of arms from the store of a wealthy merchant and in cutting up chains to reinforce the barricades.

In the subsequent fighting Tatiana's father Tikhon was killed. Despite her grief, she went to the house of a local doctor and demanded that he attend the wounded and assisted him in making dressings. The day after the uprising, which resulted in the deaths of 10 inhabitants of Kamyshin and a policeman, a vicious repression began.

Punitive detachments arrested 39 people. In ensuing trials, 2 participants in the uprising received 20 years hard labour, and 2 others to sentences of 10 years and 6 years each, whilst one rebel, Kolesov (described either as a Socialist-Revolutionary or a member of the RSDLP) committed suicide in jail.

Tatiana was arrested herself. After an unpleasant three year stint in prison she was released due to lack of evidence, on March 17th 1909, along with eighteen others, but banned from working as a primary school teacher.

She left for Kharkov, where she decided to study medicine but found it not to her taste. She then took courses in teaching in higher education. There young people passionately discussed the question of women's equality. She then returned to Kamyshin.

As a Bolshevik she took a full part in the unfolding revolution in Kamyshin and the establishment of Soviet power there in 1918. She was involved in a women's demonstration on July 13th, 1917 with the slogans "Advance, working women, to the light!" "Long live the real realisation of women's rights!", "Woman is a public figure". She organised a Union of Women and undertook extensive educational work, giving lectures, and organising discussions and debates, on philosophical, medical and pedagogical subjects. She also set up amateur art groups and played in amateur dramatic performances. Her niece the well-known Soviet children's book author Valentina Mukhina-Petrinskaya, remembered her as "brave, cheerful and talented", and that she wrote revolutionary poems that were popular with the Kamyshin youth. She described her as also being a good soprano singer.

In February 1917, she was elected to the city Duma. She spoke for the Union of Women at the Zemstvo congress in early October 1917 and at the county-wide Peasant Congress of Soviets in January 1918. There she was elected as Commissar of Public Education.

She started to reform the school system in the area, including the abolition of religious education in the schools and co-education of boys and girls, the abolition of cadet schools, theological schools and seminaries, and female diocesan schools. Some teachers objected to these moves, and there is evidence that this led to her subsequent denunciation and arrest by the Denikinists. She was to write: "We will grow, we will fight, women comrades! You cannot lock yourself in a tight circle of personal life, responding to everything around with indifference."

Increasingly disillusioned with the Soviet government, she joined the Kamyshin group of anarchist communists in 1919. She was sacked from her position of commissar of public education, and returned to primary school teaching.

However, on July 15th, 1919 the forces of the White Marshal Denikin, under the command of the bloodthirsty General Viktor Pokrovsky, captured the city. The wounded, families of workers and office workers had already been evacuated, and Tatiana either did not have time to leave or wished to stay with her young son Yuri.

The secretary of the anarchist communist group, P. Stepanov, was arrested and never seen alive again. Tatiana was herself arrested and spent a month in prison.

On August 18th four Red commanders were publicly hanged in the main square. Tatiana was hanged there on the following day. Her last words cried from the scaffold were: "Take care of the children, they will see a new life." followed by invective against the Denikinists. Three days later, the Denikinists were forced to evacuate Kamyshin, having been there less than a month.

Nick Heath

Sources:

Issue 2 of Anarkhiia, underground publication of anarchist underground. Describing Torgasheva's conversion to anarchist communism and her death:

http://oldcancer.narod.ru/anarchism/anarhia_2.htm

<https://infokam.su/n38505.html>

Kamyshin uprising, 1906:

<https://infokam.su/n1851.html>