



**Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment In Russia*  
(London: C. W. Daniel Company, 1925)**

**Chapter II**

**PETROGRAD**



MY parents had moved to St. Petersburg when I was thirteen. Under the discipline of a German school in Königsberg and the Prussian attitude toward everything Russian, I had grown up in the atmosphere of hatred to that country. I dreaded especially the terrible Nihilists who had killed Tsar Alexander II, so good and kind, as I had been taught. St. Petersburg was to me an evil thing. But the gaiety of the city, its vivacity and brilliancy, soon dispelled my childish fancies and made the city appear like a fairy dream. Then my curiosity was aroused by the revolutionary mystery which seemed to hang over everyone, and of which no one dared to speak. When four years later I left with my sister for America I was no longer the German Gretchen to whom Russia spelt evil. My whole soul had been transformed and the seed planted for what was to be my life's work. Especially did St. Petersburg remain in my memory a vivid picture, full of life and mystery.

I found Petrograd of 1920 quite a different place. It was almost in ruins, as if a hurricane had swept over it. The houses looked like broken old tombs upon neglected and forgotten cemeteries. The streets were dirty and deserted; all life had gone from them. The population of Petrograd before the war was almost two million; in 1920 it had dwindled to five hundred thousand. The people walked about like living corpses; the shortage of food and fuel was slowly sapping the city; grim death was clutching at its heart. Emaciated and frost-bitten men, women, and children were being whipped by the common lash, the search for a piece of bread or a stick of wood. It was a heart-rending sight by day, an oppressive weight at night. Especially were the nights of the first month in Petrograd dreadful. The utter stillness of the large city was paralysing. It fairly haunted me, this awful oppressive silence broken only by occasional shots. I would lay awake trying to pierce the mystery. Did not Zorin say that capital punishment had been abolished? Why this shooting? Doubts disturbed my mind, but I tried to wave them aside. I had come to learn.

Much of my first knowledge and impressions of the October Revolution and the events that followed I received from the Zorins. As already mentioned, both had lived in America, spoke English, and were eager to enlighten me upon the history of the Revolution. They were devoted to the cause and worked

very hard: he, especially, who was secretary of the Petrograd committee of his party, besides editing the daily, *Krasnaya Gazetta*, and participating in other activities.

It was from Zorin that I first learned about that legendary figure, Makhno. The latter was an Anarchist, I was informed, who under the Tsar had been sentenced to *katorga*. Liberated by the February revolution, he became the leader of a peasant army in the Ukraina, proving himself extremely able and daring and doing splendid work in the defence of the Revolution. For some time Makhno worked in harmony with the Bolsheviki, fighting the counter-revolutionary forces. Then he became antagonistic, and now his army, recruited from bandit elements, was fighting the Bolsheviki. Zorin related that he had been one of a committee sent to Makhno to bring about an understanding. But Makhno would not listen to reason. He continued his warfare against the Soviets and was considered a dangerous counter-revolutionist.

I had no means of verifying the story, and I was far from disbelieving the Zorins. Both appeared most sincere and dedicated to their work, types of religious zealots ready to burn the heretic, but equally ready to sacrifice their own lives for their cause. I was much impressed by the simplicity of their lives. Holding a responsible position, Zorin could have received special rations, but they lived very poorly, their supper often consisting only of herring, black bread, and tea. I thought it especially admirable because Lisa Zorin was with child at the time.

Two weeks after my arrival in Russia I was invited to attend the Alexander Herzen commemoration in the Winter Palace. The white marble hall where the gathering took place seemed to intensify the bitter frost, but the people present were unmindful of the penetrating cold. I also was conscious only of the unique situation: Alexander Herzen, one of the most hated revolutionists of his time, honoured in the Winter Palace! Frequently before the spirit of Herzen had found its way into the house of the Romanovs. It was when the "Kolokol," published abroad and sparkling with the brilliancy of Herzen and Turgenev, would in some mysterious manner be discovered on the desk of the Tsar. Now the Tsars were no more, but the spirit of Herzen had risen again and was witnessing the realization of the dream of one of Russia's great men.

One evening I was informed that Zinoviev had returned from Moscow and would see me. He arrived about midnight. He looked very tired and was constantly disturbed by urgent messages. Our talk was of a general nature, of the grave situation in Russia, the shortage of food and fuel then particularly poignant, and about the labour situation in America. He was anxious to know "how soon the revolution could be expected in the United States." He left upon me no definite impression, but I was conscious of something lacking in the man, though I could not determine at the time just what it was.

Another Communist I saw much of the first weeks was John Reed. I had known him in America. He was living in the Astoria, working hard and preparing for his return to the United States. He was to journey through Latvia and he seemed apprehensive of the outcome. He had been in Russia during the October days and this was his second visit. Like Shatov he also insisted that the dark sides of the Bolshevik régime were inevitable. He believed fervently that the Soviet Government would emerge from its narrow party lines and that it would presently establish the Communistic Commonwealth. We spent much time together, discussing the various phases of the situation.

So far I had met none of the Anarchists and their failure to call rather surprised me. One day a friend I had known in the States came to inquire whether I would see several members of an Anarchist organization. I readily assented. From them I learned a version of the Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik régime utterly different from what I had heard before. It was so startling, so terrible that I could not believe it. They invited me to attend a small gathering they had called to present to me their views.

The following Sunday I went to their conference. Passing Nevsky Prospekt, near Liteiny Street, I came upon a group of women huddled together to protect themselves from the cold. They were surrounded by soldiers, talking and gesticulating. Those women, I learned, were prostitutes who were selling themselves for a pound of bread, a piece of soap or chocolate. The soldiers were the only ones who could afford to buy them because of their extra rations. Prostitution in revolutionary Russia. I wondered. What is the Communist Government doing for these unfortunates? What are the Workers' and Peasants' Soviets doing? My escort smiled sadly. The Soviet Government had closed the houses of prostitution and was now trying to drive the women off the streets, but hunger and cold drove them back again; besides, the soldiers had to be humoured. It was too ghastly, too incredible to be real, yet there they were--those shivering creatures for sale and their buyers, the red defenders of the Revolution. "The cursed interventionists, the blockade--they are responsible," said my escort. Why, yes, the counter-revolutionists and the blockade are responsible, I reassured myself. I tried to dismiss the thought of that huddled group, but it clung to me. I felt something snap within me.

At last we reached the Anarchist quarters, in a dilapidated house in a filthy backyard. I was ushered into a small room crowded with men and women. The sight recalled pictures of thirty years ago when, persecuted and hunted from place to place, the Anarchists in America were compelled to meet in a dingy hall on Orchard Street, New York, or in the dark rear room of a saloon. That was in capitalistic America. But this is revolutionary Russia, which the Anarchists had helped to free. Why should they have to gather in secret and in such a place?

That evening and the following day I listened to a recital of the betrayal of the Revolution by the Bolsheviki. Workers from the Baltic factories spoke of their enslavement, Kronstadt sailors voiced their bitterness and indignation against the people they had helped to power and who had become their masters. One of the speakers had been condemned to death by the Bolsheviki for his Anarchist ideas, but had escaped and was now living illegally. He related how the sailors had been robbed of the freedom of their Soviets, how every breath of life was being censored. Others spoke of the Red Terror and repression in Moscow, which resulted in the throwing of a bomb into the gathering of the Moscow section of the Communist Party in September, 1919. They told me of the over-filled prisons, of the violence practised on the workers and peasants. I listened rather impatiently, for everything in me cried out against this indictment. It sounded impossible; it could not be. Someone was surely at fault, but probably it was they, my comrades, I thought. They were unreasonable, impatient for immediate results. Was not violence inevitable in a revolution, and was it not imposed upon the Bolsheviki by the Interventionists? My comrades were indignant. "Disguise yourself so the Bolsheviki do not recognize you; take a pamphlet of Kropotkin and try to distribute it in a Soviet meeting. You will see soon whether we told you the truth. Above all, get out of the First House of the Soviet. Live among the people and you will have all the proofs you need."

How childish and trifling it all seemed in the face of the world event that was taking place in Russia! No, I could not credit their stories. I would wait and study conditions. But my mind was in a turmoil, and the nights became more oppressive than ever.

The day arrived when I was given a chance to attend the meeting of the Petro-Soviet. It was to be a double celebration in honour of the return of Karl Radek to Russia and Joffe's report on the peace treaty with Esthonia. As usual I went with the Zorins. The gathering was in the Tauride Palace, the former meeting place of the Russian Duma. Every entrance to the hall was guarded by soldiers, the platform surrounded by them holding their guns at attention. The hall was crowded to the very doors. I was on the platform overlooking the sea of faces below. Starved and wretched they looked, these sons and daughters of the people, the heroes of Red Revolution! I felt very humble before them.

Zinoviev presided. After the "Internationale" had been sung by the audience standing, Zinoviev opened the meeting. He spoke at length. His voice is high pitched, without depth. The moment I heard him I realized what I had missed in him at our first meeting--depth, strength of character. Next came Radek. He was clever, witty, sarcastic, and he paid his respects to the counter-revolutionists and to the White Guards. Altogether an interesting man and an interesting address.

Joffe looked the diplomat. Well fed and groomed, he seemed rather out of place in that assembly. He spoke of the peace conditions with Esthonia, which were received with enthusiasm by the audience. Certainly these people wanted peace. Would it ever come to Russia?

Last spoke Zorin, by far the ablest and most convincing that evening. Then the meeting was thrown open to discussion. A Menshevik asked for the floor. Immediately pandemonium broke loose. Yells of "Traitor!" "Kolchack!" "Counter-Revolutionist!" came from all parts of the audience and even from the platform. It looked to me like an unworthy proceeding for a revolutionary assembly.

On the way home I spoke to Zorin about it. He laughed. "Free speech is a bourgeois superstition," he said; "during a revolutionary period there can be no free speech." I was rather dubious about the sweeping statement, but I felt that I had no right to judge. I was a newcomer, while the people at the Tauride Palace had sacrificed and suffered so much for the Revolution. I had no right to judge.