



**Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment In Russia*  
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**Chapter XXXI**

**EXPLOITING THE FAMINE**



LATE in the summer of 1921 there came the harrowing news of the famine. To those who had kept in touch with inner affairs the information was not quite unexpected. We had learned during the early part of the summer that a large proportion of the population was doomed to death from starvation. At that time a group of scientific agriculturists had assembled in Moscow. Their report showed that, owing to bureaucratic centralization, and corruption and delay in seed distribution, timely and sufficient sowing had been prevented. The Soviet press kept the report of the agricultural conference from the public. But in July items began to appear in the *Pravda* and the *Izvestia* telling of the terrible drought in the Volga region and the fearful conditions in the famine-stricken districts.

Immediately various groups and individuals came forward ready to cooperate with the Government in coping with the calamity. The Left Wing elements-Anarchists, Social Revolutionists, and Maximalists--offered to organize relief work and to collect funds. But they received no encouragement from the Soviet authorities. On the other hand, elements of the Right, the Cadets (Constitutional Democrats), were received with open arms. Kishkin, Minister of Finance under Kerensky, Mme. Kuskova, Prokopovitch, and other prominent Conservatives, who had bitterly fought the Revolution, were accepted by the Bolsheviki. These people had been denounced as counter-revolutionists and repeatedly arrested and imprisoned, yet they were given preference and permitted to organize the group known as the Citizens' Committee. When the latter refused to work under the guardianship of the Moscow Soviet, insisting upon complete autonomy and the right to publish its own paper, the Government consented. Such discrimination in favour of reactionaries as against those who had faithfully stood by the Revolution could be explained only in two ways. First, the Bolsheviki considered it dangerous to grant the Left elements free access to the peasantry; secondly, it was necessary to make an impression on Europe, which could be effectively done by means of the most conservative group. This became clear even before the Citizens' Committee began its relief work.

In the beginning the Committee received the entire support of the Government. A special building was assigned for its headquarters and it was granted the right to issue its own paper, called *Pomoshtch* (Succour). Members of the Committee were also promised permission to go to Western Europe for the purpose of arousing interest and getting support for the famine stricken. Two numbers of the paper were issued. Its appearance caused significant comment: it was an exact reproduction, in size, type, and general form, of the old *Vyedomosti*, the most reactionary sheet under the former régime. The publication was, of course, very guarded in its tone. But between the lines one could read its antagonism

to the ruling Party. Its first issue contained a letter from the Metropolitan Tikhon, wherein he commanded the faithful to send their contributions to him. He assured his flock that he was to have complete control of the distribution of the donations. The Citizens' Committee was given *carte blanche* in carrying on its work, and the fact was heralded by the Bolsheviks as proof of their liberality and willingness to cooperate with all elements in famine relief.

Presently the Soviet Government entered into an agreement with the American Relief Administration and other European organizations regarding aid for the Volga sufferers, and then the headquarters of the Citizens' Committee were raided, the paper suppressed, and the leading members of the Committee thrown into the Tcheka on the usual charge of counter-revolution. Now it was reasonably certain that Mme. Kuskova and her co-workers were no more counter-revolutionary when they were permitted to organize Volga relief than they had been at any time since 1917. Why, then, did the Communist State accept them while rejecting the assistance of true revolutionists? For no other reason than propaganda purposes. When the Citizens' Committee had served that purpose it was kicked overboard in true Bolshevik fashion. Only one person the Tcheka dared not touch—Vera Nikolayevna Figner, the venerable revolutionist. Great humanitarian that she is, she joined the Citizens' Committee and devoted herself to its work with the same zeal that had made her so effective as one of the leading spirits of the *Narodnaya Volya*. Twenty-two years of living death in Schulsselburg had failed to destroy her ardour. When the Citizens' Committee was arrested, Vera Nikolayevna demanded to share the same fate, but the Tcheka knew the spiritual influence of this woman in Russia and abroad, and she was left in peace. The other members of the Citizens' Committee were kept in prison for a long time, then exiled to remote parts of Russia and finally deported.

Except for the foreign organizations doing relief work in Russia, the Soviet Government could now stand before the world as the sole dispenser of support to the starving in the famine district. Kalinin, the marionette President of the Socialist Republic, equipped with much propaganda literature and surrounded by a large staff of Soviet officials and foreign correspondents, made his triumphal march through the stricken territory. It was widely heralded throughout the world, and the desired effect was achieved. But the real work in the famine region was carried on not so much by the official machine as by the great host of unknown men and women from the ranks of the proletariat and the intelligentsia. Most devotedly and with utter consecration they gave of their own depleted energies. Many of them perished from typhus, exposure, and exhaustion; some were slain by the power of darkness which now, even more than in Tolstoy's time, holds many sections of Russia in its grip. Doctors, nurses, and relief workers were often killed by the unfortunates they had come to aid, as evil spirits who had willed the famine and the misfortunes of Russia. These were the real heroes and martyrs, unknown and unsung.