

**The Kiev Lukyanovskaya
Convict Prison**



Olga Taratuta

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The Kiev Lukyanovskaya
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November 15, 1916

Finally I was alone in my own tiny cell. Roll call was finished. My “archangels” had retreated to the far end of the corridor to relieve their boredom with gossiping. Finally some relief time. I love this time. The door will not open again till 6 a.m.; in the meantime not even a mosquito can get in. I long for this soothing peace. I’m alone with myself

I always look forward to this time as a blessing, but today . . . today I feel like I’m losing my mind in expectation of this time. I spent the day in torment. From early morning I felt myself in the grip of physical pain that seemed to be both longstanding and of recent origin.

The experience ten years ago seized me with such intensity, with such force, that I was glad to leave my cell today when they summoned me to work. There, in the hubbub of people and machines, I cravenly hoped to save myself from the baleful memories gripping my brain and soul. In vain! The whole day I was assailed by these memories. With each passing hour I wished more and more not to struggle with these overpowering emotions but to surrender to them completely; not to run from them, but to meet them head on. The more vividly I recalled the events of that fateful day, the more I longed to immerse myself in the stream of those events, to be overwhelmed by them. But now I had to deal with people, “archangels,” and machines. They tore me away from the images of the dearly departed, from everything connected with them. In the morning I was still trying to save myself by immersing myself in this hell. But after two hours I was already gnashing my teeth from wanting to escape from everything into my own quiet cell, where I could

devote myself whole-heartedly to my dear, dead comrades.

And so passed an excruciatingly long day. Finally my yearning for quiet time arrived. I was alone, and ready to receive my beloved, inspiring visitors. I welcomed them all. Hour after hour I relived with them the last day of their lives up to the moment when they were taken away, the moment when they uttered their last goodbyes to me. And even beyond, on the execution block at the moment the hangman's hand came down.

It was already two weeks from the day of sentencing. I have been let out into the courtyard of the prison at daybreak. From the courtyard of the women's building it was possible to see the windows of the third storey of the men's prison. By agreement with Boris and Osip, they were to hang a towel from the bars of their window as a sign that the inmates of the cell were still alive. When I call to them, they would look down and greet me. Sometimes we would exchange a few thoughts that, although of little significance to the administration, were important to us. I returned to my cell for a few hours of peace.

And so it was on the morning of November 15, 1906. I knock impatiently on the door. The guard is late, the door remains shut. I'm getting agitated. I feel that Sherochka is close to me, that she is hugging me. "Don't be upset, Olga, as long as I am with you, they are living," she says quietly, tenderly. Turning around, I look at her with amazement, almost with annoyance. What is she talking about? What sort of nonsense? It's true that she was sentenced to death along with Boris and Osip. But neither I nor any of the prisoners or even the administration ever doubted that her sentence would be commuted, just as the sentences of all the women condemned to death in the Odessa prison had been commuted, up till now. Everyone believed this, except for Sherochka herself. In her soul she was convinced that the

sentence would be carried out. But she had been silent until this morning. To my angry objections and proofs of the absurdity of her conviction, she responded with a gentle caress, quietly smiling, and repeated: “There’s nothing to be done, Olga, just don’t be upset, don’t get angry, dear mother.”

Finally the door opened. I ran out into the courtyard. The towel was hanging out, and Boris and Osip were standing at the window, waiting for me. They said “Hi!” I yelled “How are you?” They nodded their heads. Boris joked: “Would you like us to pray for you?” The matron pulled me away; I left the courtyard. Sherochka was already preparing breakfast for everybody’s darling Lenya. (Five months ago they brought my son here, the plan being that he would be turned over to relatives on the outside once my sentence was finalized by the court.) Once our two-year-old pet had woken up, we spent a lot of time fussing with him. Some friends came to see me and pulled me out of the cell to a “secret meeting.” The secret consisted of making arrangements to celebrate Sherochka’s birthday, which was happening this month. The preference was to time the celebration to coincide with the abrogation of the death sentence. Sherochka was going to turn 22. The comrades wanted to order flowers. They decided everything would depend on the fate of the other two: there could be no thought of a celebration if Boris and Osip were executed.

We could hardly wait for the visiting hour. We were especially impatient because our family members would be the first to learn about the confirmation of sentences, which they would be able to communicate to us. But the visiting hour came and went, and Sherochka was not called out, although she was expecting a visit from her sister. Afterwards we went outside for our walk. We were all hoping that Boris would have something to tell us. After 5 or 10 minutes they called Sherochka to the main office.

Everyone walking got excited and rushed to her. She waved us off impatiently: “Don’t make a fuss, comrades, don’t get excited, they’re calling me to meet my sister. I’ll be back with news within the hour.” I didn’t doubt for a moment that she was just being summoned for a visitor. We waited.

Through the wall from the men’s block an express delivery came flying. It was for me: a bundle of lilies with a letter attached. This meant that Boris had been to visitation and already returned with news and flowers. Comrades straggle around the courtyard: some with letters, others exchange remarks through the wall with comrades of the men’s block. I sat by the entranceway of our block and began reading. I read for a long time. The letter was very long and written in a fine hand. It had been composed last night and this morning, before visitation. I don’t know how long it took to read the letter, because I was totally absorbed in its content. During the previous two weeks, I had often received letters from Boris, and each time they impressed me as coming from a person possessed of strong and splendid courage.

I had known Boris for many years and had taken part with him in two terrorist acts. We organized study circles among the workers in Odessa. We had been incarcerated in the same prisons. We were released in accordance with the amnesty of 1905 as part of the same case. And now we were again imprisoned as part of the same case. I had seen him when he was young, healthy, and energetic; and when he was ill with eleven wounds; I had seen in successes and in failures, of which there were more than a few in our collaborative work. In all the twists and turns of life, he remained a staunch anarchist-revolutionary, an active fighter for the truth and justice of the anarchist ideal. He was dearly loved and respected by all who shared his views. He was even respected and marvelled at by

his opponents. "It's as if he was spun from the rays of the sun," said one old social-democrat-Bolshevik, who spoke with him several times in 1905 in Yekaterinoslav. That was Boris, as we knew him for many years, and yet he became an especially wonderful person for us from the day of his sentence, when it became clear that physically he would cease to exist. I say physically, for it was only in a physical sense that he felt himself at the Rubicon of what is called life. Spiritually he felt that he would live for ages, invigorated and immortal, through the everlasting idea which he embodied, for which he had struggled and died. I'm involuntarily distracted from the events of that day, when the image of Boris appears vividly in my mind, and I have almost a physical sense of his presence.

How long I was reading Boris's letter, I don't know. I remember only that as soon as I had finished, I was seized with worry about Sherochka's long absence. I asked the senior matron to send someone to the main office to find out if her sentence was confirmed. The matron returned without learning anything, and said only that visitation was ongoing and that Boris and Osip were present as well. Another half hour went by. We had already been directed back to our cells. Sherochka had not returned. Anxiety was growing. I convinced the senior matron to go in person to get some news. We awaited her return with considerable stress. She's coming She's moving slowly. I go to meet her. I see that her face has red splotches. I understood "Confirmed?" I ask. She nods her head affirmatively. "All three?" Her lips are contorted, she can't say anything. She nods her head I turn towards the comrades, I want to tell them. I listen as Yasinskaya (the senior matron) makes an effort to speak. I listen eagerly. "Shereshevskaya asked that" "What?" Yasinskaya babbles something, then collapses at the entrance, sobbing. The comrades stand around in a circle, quietly. Yasinskaya pulls

herself together and finishes: “Shereshevskaya asked that you not make a fuss and go to your cells.” A tactical ploy. We understood. “And why has Shereshevskaya not returned?” The sentence was confirmed, but that still didn’t mean that she wouldn’t return. After confirmation of a sentence there are still two weeks before the execution can be carried out, and furthermore executions were not carried out in the daytime. “She is delayed with her sister. She will soon return; in the meantime, just go to your cells.” Nobody moved. I announced that we would wait there for Shera. I stood there and a few comrades stood beside me. I remembered that Boris and Osip had already returned from visitation. I ran to the laundry room, from where Boris’s window could be seen. All the windows were already illuminated. But Boris’s window was dark. The towel was hanging from the bars. At the top of my lungs I call Boris and Osip. Comrades stand silently at all the windows of the men’s block. There is also silence from the dark window. The towel is hanging there. Yasinskaya begs me to leave. I call again and again. Someone figured out how to remove the towel. I understood Finally

Completely confused, I go somewhere with the comrades. Suddenly I remember the meeting! They promised to meet with me before the execution at no matter what time, day or night. I run to Yasinskaya. I send her to the main office, while I myself rushed into my cell to get the cyanide. I knew that Boris and Osip always had some with them. [Subsequently it was explained that only Boris had poison. They took Osip from his walk without his cap, in which was sewn the poison. That’s why Boris also didn’t use poison.] In the drawer of the nightstand we still had three grains of cyanide. I stuck the poison in my pocket and waited. Yasinskaya returns with the categorical refusal: “The warden says: “Under no circumstances. Permission is granted only to a child related to them.” Only now did I

remember that Lenya wasn't with me. Where is he? I ran along the cells. Found him. He was sitting on a cot in Vera Gorbits's cell and pouring eau de cologne on himself from a flask. Vera, in a state of agitation, was running around the cell. I carry Lenya to Yasinskaya, I babble some kind of nonsense to him, and place the poison in the pocket of his jacket. They take him away, but bring him back five minutes later. I ask him some foolish questions, and receive foolish answers. The poison is still in the pocket. I ask Yasinskaya why they returned so soon. It turns out that Lenya was not allowed access to the condemned prisoners. The matron stood with the child in the courtyard, opposite their window, and through an open vent were able to speak with them from a considerable distance. The knowledge that the poison had not been passed to them gnawed away at my mind. I call Yasinskaya, and persuade her to deliver the poison. She's frightened, is very reluctant, but, after an excruciatingly long discussion, she agrees to do it. But she returns with the poison – there's no possibility of getting through to them. I knock on the door, demand a meeting. Categorical refusal. In desperation I toss the poison on the table. *Finis*.

Time passes. Lenya demands attention, but I can't give him any. I want him to lie down.

Suddenly the door bangs open. Deputy Warden Zolotarev, Yasinskaya, and a couple of others are there. "Get ready for the meeting!" I fly around the cell like a loose cannon. My every movement is being observed, so there is no way I can reach for the poison, which had ended up under the lamp. They hurry me. I can't delay any longer, I have to go without the poison.

I went to the farewell meeting in a state of mental anguish which my friends had never seen me in before. It was at that

moment that I understood that it is much, much easier to be crucified than to accompany others to the crucifixion. The consciousness of death in the name of an idea is so clear, simple, and joyous.

A year ago, when I was living in a conspiratorial apartment, our Jewish landlady treated us to some brandy in connection with some kind of Jewish holiday. Someone asked what we should drink to. Another person proposed that we drink to the goal that none of us should die in our own beds. Everyone willingly clinked glasses and drank up.

A year went by. One of our band of friends perished while offering armed resistance. An indefatigable, implacable fighter against private property and the state, the anarchist Gelinker, after offering stubborn resistance to the police, shot himself with the last bullet in his revolver.

Another member of our group, the famous anarchist Notka -- a splendid comrade, organizer, and propagandist, my co-defendant in the Warsaw trial, the terror of the Bialystok authorities -- perished during a pogrom. In 1906 he had organized self-defense in poor, working class neighbourhoods. A whole district of poor peasants and workers was defended by the anarchists, but some of them were killed there, including Notka, who was savagely tortured to death by the police.

And now I was going to accompany to the executioner's block my closest, most beloved comrades. I was tormented with the realization that this cup would not pass from them. What a great difference from the mood a year ago about not dying on one's own bed. But such a contradiction was inevitable, it seems to me, for revolutionaries who are liable to find themselves in the situation of being buried rather than being the gravediggers.

However, I don't know if it was like this for everyone. Possibly I was weaker than the others. I only know how it was for me. I was devastated, tormented by the impending defilement of my friends by the hangman. If I still wasn't crying, it was only because I was unable to do so.

It was in such a state that I crossed the threshold to the condemned

And there I stopped short. I felt desperately that I couldn't cope with what confronted me, there on the threshold of the condemned. How can convey the situation? Let me at least say that they met me on the threshold quietly, joyously, and smiling brightly; that their faces shone with a very special, spiritual quality that came from within each of them. Their voices sounded and their eyes lit up in a new way. Faith, passionate faith in the deathless greatness of the idea of anarchism sounded in their speech.

“We're not dying, Olga. We're alive and we will live with you, and with the fighters for anarchism, in your terrible struggle, in your victories and defeats, in prisons, in katorga, and in your deaths. We will always be with you until the day we celebrate the triumph and victory of our great idea of anarchism,” said Boris.

“We will go on living, Olga. We are immortal, like the immortal struggle for the great ideals of anarchism, for which they are crucifying us,” said Sherockka.

Again I broke down. I said something that at least partly expressed my feelings. I was oppressed with the sense of not having fulfilled by duty. I restrained any impulse to speak with bitterness. I can say only that everything experienced by me on

that day, up until the meeting – up until the moment when I crossed the threshold to them – appeared to be strange, superfluous, and hazy. Everything I had experienced up till then was in crude dissonance with the greatness I found in their presence. I uttered a groan, but the sound was not heard behind the door

I left them a different person, renewed. Ten years have passed since them. Many have left our ranks. An enormous number were executed. Many, like myself, have spent the decade being dumped in various Russian katorga prisons. I have endured a lot and much of what I took away from the cell of my beloved condemned comrades has faded and become effaced in the throes of implacable struggle. I've acquired new outlooks, but what remains with me to this day from the memory of my dead comrades is their unshakeable faith in the triumph of the idea of anarchism and their passionate, unquenchable thirst to fight for it. Again I've been distracted. I will continue.

The carriage for the condemned approached. The visit ended. We said goodbye. Shera whispered: "There's a letter in the nightstand." We warmly embraced for the last time.

In the my cell was Vera Khalfin. Lenya couldn't sleep, he was fretting. It was already 11 p.m. I tried to rock Lenya to sleep. He insisted on a song. I sing Before my eyes I could see my lively, affectionate, cheerful comrades. In my mind's eye I want to follow them to the place of execution, to the very moment when they are under the control of the hangman – but I cannot. Neither my soul nor my brain can process this. I keep seeing for a moment the gallows, the ropes, and the terrible sight of bodies swaying in the air. But before this vision can reach the conscious level, it quickly fades and replaced by others: the cell, and my visitation with them – lively, warm,

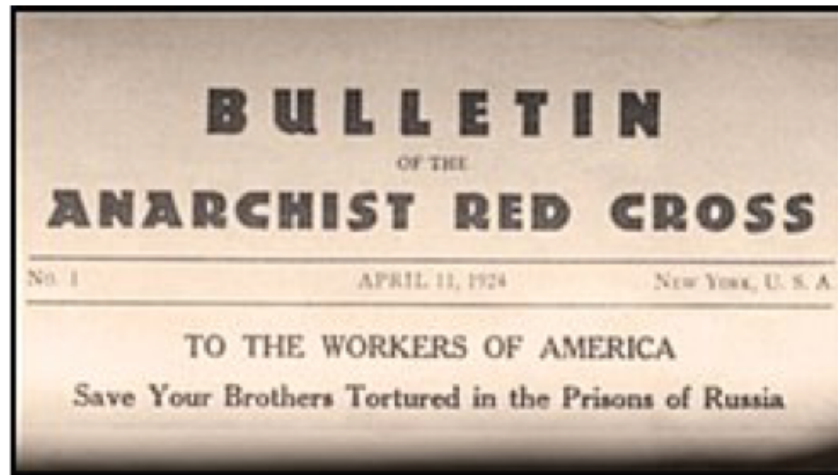
quietly joyful. Lenya frets, he wants a song. I sing He goes to sleep

I rush to the nightstand and find the letter. It was written the night before. For some reason Sherochka expected they would be executed then. In her letter she said goodbye to myself and Lenya. The letter was divided into two sections: the first half was devoted to Lenya (whom she warmly loved) and precepts for him. The second part was devoted to me

It is with inexpressible pain that I recall that Sherochka's letter, the letter of Osip (which was delivered to me by the Chief Warden of the prison the following morning), and also the letter of the rabbi, received on the third day after the execution, have been lost. Osip's letter, just like Sherochka's, are exceptionally valuable not for me alone. I remember the overwhelming impression produced by Sherochka's letter on all the imprisoned comrades. It was passed from hand to hand. Most striking in the letter was her passionate hymn to life at the moment of her death. Joyful, triumphant life pulsed from each line, from each word. Reading the letter, I forgot for a moment that her pulse had already stopped beating

I imagined that we were together with her in freedom. We were going to test a dynamite-bomb. It was November, early morning, a strong wind was blowing. We walked along a beach, searching for a safe place for the test, a place from which we could easily disappear after the explosion.

The sea was in a thundering rage. Waves, one after another, crashed against the rocky shore. Sherochka was completely spell-bound by the raging sea. With uncommon agility, she climbed up on a rock. The wind was ruffling her dress, her hair was dishevelled, her arms were extended towards the sea.



An excerpt from "*Heroic Women of the Russian Revolution*"
by Emma Goldman

Olga Taratuta, the daughter of intellectual parents, though of slight physique, possessed a powerful mentality and was in a certain sense a pioneer. When barely twenty she organised, together with several friends, the first Anarchist group in Southern Russia. It was a dangerous undertaking, and her activities soon attracted the attention of the political police. Arrested at the beginning of the revolution of 1905, Olga was doomed to 30 years' katorga (hard labour prison) in Odessa. Ingenious and daring, she succeeded in escaping, again taking up her former work, this time under an assumed name. For a considerable time all the efforts of the gendarmerie to find her were fruitless, but in 1906 her disguise was discovered, she was re-arrested, and sentenced once more to 30 years' prison. On her return to freedom, in 1917, Olga devoted herself to the political Red Cross work, aiding the victims of the Hetman Skoropadsky regime in the Ukraine, and subsequently giving relief and cheer to the new groups of political prisoners created by the Communist State.

In the latter part of 1920 an All-Russian Conference of Anarchists was to take place at Kharkov. Though the gathering was to be held with the knowledge and consent of the Soviet Government, all the delegates were placed under arrest on the very eve of the Conference, without warning or explanation. Among the several hundred prisoners was also Olga Taratuta. She was sent to the Butyrki Prison, in Moscow, the very place where so many of her comrades had suffered and died in the days of the Romanov regime. There Olga underwent the most harrowing experience of her eventful life. On the night of April 25th the political wing of the prison was raided by the Tcheka, the prisoners were attacked in their sleep and badly maltreated, and then rushed to the railroad station – some of them with nothing on save their night clothes – and transferred to other prisons.

Olga found herself in the dreaded Orlov prison, which served as a central point of “distribution” under Nikolas II. The character of the administration and of the regimen of that prison were such as to drive the politicals quickly to a hunger strike in protest against their treatment. Olga was again removed to another prison, thence being sent out to exile in the dismal region of the Veliky Ustiug, and finally ordered to Kiev, where she had formerly ministered so devotedly to the Communist prisoners of the Hetman reaction. A recent letter of Olga to a friend abroad contains the significant remark that persecution by the Soviet Government has robbed her of more vitality than all the years of incarceration she had suffered at the hands of the Romanov autocracy...

(ed. note: This essay was originally published in 1925, 13 years before Taratuta was executed during Stalin's purges. See biographic sketch in the following pages for more information.)

Olga Taratua, a short a biography by Nick Heath

Olga is considered the “grandmother” of the Russian anarchist movement and a founder of the Anarchist Black Cross

“The Kharkov comrades, with the heroic personality of Olga Taratuta at their head, had all served the Revolution, fought on its fronts, endured punishment from the Whites, persecution and imprisonment by the Bolsheviki. Nothing had daunted their revolutionary ardour and anarchist faith.” Living My Life, Emma Goldman

Elka Ruvinskaia was born in the village of Novodmitrovka near Kherson in the Ukraine on the 21st January 1876 (or possibly 1874 or 1878). Her family was Jewish and her father ran a small shop. After her studies she worked as a teacher. She was arrested for “political suspicion” in 1895. In 1897 she joined a Social Democrat group around the brothers A. and I. Grossman (who later became anarchists) in Elizavetgrad, and distributed their propaganda. In 1898-1901 she was a member of the Elizavetgrad committee of the Social-Democratic Party and the South Russian Union of Workers. In 1901 she fled abroad, living in Germany and Switzerland where she met Lenin and Plekhanov and worked for the paper Iskra.

In 1903 In Switzerland she became an anarchist-communist. In 1904 she returned to Odessa and joined the group Without Compromise which was made up of anarchists and disciples of the Polish socialist Machajski. She was arrested in April 1904 and in the autumn was freed for lack of evidence. She then joined the Odessa Workers Group of Anarchist Communists which distributed propaganda and organised workers’ circles. She began to acquire a reputation as one of the most outstanding anarchists in Russia. She used the pseudonym

Babushka (Granny) – a strange alias considering she was still only around thirty!

At the beginning of October 1905 she was arrested again but was again released with the October amnesty. She joined the Battle Detachment of the South Russian Group of Anarchist Communists which used the tactic of “motiveless terror”- that is attacks on institutions and representatives of the autocratic regime rather than particular targeted individuals . She helped prepare the notorious attack on the Libman café in December 1905. She was arrested and sentenced to 17 years imprisonment in 1906 She escaped from prison on 15th December and fled to Moscow. In December 1906 she joined the Moscow anarchist-communist organisation Buntar (Rebel) and agitated in the workplaces. After the arrest of group members in March 1907 she and some others fled to Switzerland where they edited a paper of the same name.

In autumn 1907 Olga returned to Ekaterinoslav and Kiev and after moved on to Odessa. She prepared an attentat against general A.V.Kaulbars, the commander of the Odessa military region, and against general Tolmachov governor of Odessa and an explosion at the Odessa tribunal.

At the end of February 1908 she went to Kiev to prepare the blowing up of the prison walls of Lukianovka prison and organise the escape of arrested anarchists there. However all other members of the group were rounded up but Olga managed to flee. She was arrested at Ekaterinoslav and at the end of 1909 sentenced to 21 years imprisonment. She was freed from Lukianovka prison in March 1917. As Paul Avrich says in his book *The Russian Anarchists* she was now “a tired and subdued woman in her late forties,” at first keeping her distance from the movement. In May 1918 she organised the Political Red Cross

in Kiev, which help imprisoned revolutionaries regardless of their political affiliations, and which once even helped Bolsheviks. By now her old revolutionary zeal had returned, fired by her rising indignation at how anarchist revolutionaries were being treated by the Bolsheviks. In 1919 she moved to Moscow. In June 1920 she took part in the organisation of Golos Truda (Voice of Labour) At the end of September 1920 after the signing of the pact between the Soviet government and the Makhnovists she returned to the Ukraine. In Gulyai Polye she was given 5 million roubles by the Makhnovist commanders. With this money she went to Kharkov and set up the Anarchist Black Cross which helped imprisoned and repressed anarchists. In November Olga was elected as representative of the Makhnovists in Kharkov and Moscow.

During the wave of repression against anarchists and Makhnovists in the Ukraine, Olga was arrested. The Black Cross was closed down and its centre destroyed. In January 1921 she was transported to Moscow with 40 other Ukrainian anarchists. She was one of the imprisoned anarchists allowed to attend the funeral of Kropotkin by the Bolsheviks. At the end of April 1921 she was transferred to Orlov prison. In May 1921 the Soviet Attorney General proposed to Olga that she could be released if she recanted her ideas in public. In summer 1921 she joined the 11-day hunger strike of arrested anarchists. In March 1922 she was exiled for 2 years to Velikii Ustiug.

Freed at the beginning of 1924 she moved to Kiev. She ceased all activity but kept in personal contact with various anarchists. Mid-1924 she was arrested for making anarchist propaganda, but was soon released. In 1924 she moved to Moscow. In 1927 she supported the campaign for Sacco and Vanzetti (see biography of Nikolai Rogdaev). In 1928-1929 she wrote many letters on the need to organise an international campaign for

anarchists imprisoned in the Soviet Union. In 1929 she moved to Odessa where she was arrested for trying to create anarchist cells among the rail-workers. (During this period in the 20s she was involved with the Odessa anarchists in the illegal smuggling of anarchist literature into the USSR). She got a term of 2 years in the “polit-isolator”.

She was freed in 1931 and returned to Moscow. She became a member of the Society of ex- political prisoners and exiles which attempted to get pensions for old, impoverished and sick revolutionaries, but without success. In 1933 she was re-arrested and sentenced but documents for this no longer exist. In 1937 she was living in Moscow and worked in a metal processing factory as a driller.

She was re-arrested on 27th November 1937, and accused of anarchist and counter-Soviet activity. On 8th February 1938 Olga was condemned to death by the Chief Tribunal of the Soviet Union. She was executed on the same day.

Sources:

The Russian Anarchists by Paul Avrich

Living My Life by Emma Goldman

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