‘The ideal is so beautiful, that all personal feelings fade.’: The Russian Revolution through the eyes of female revolutionaries

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'The ideal is so beautiful, that all personal feelings fade.' The Russian Revolution through the eyes of female revolutionaries

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In March 1881, tsar Alexander II was assassinated by members of the radical revolutionary organization the People's Will. One of the people involved in the planning of this assassination was twenty-nine-year-old Vera Figner (1852-1942). Twenty-five years later, the twenty-one-year-old Socialist Revolutionary Maria Spiridonova (1884-1941) assassinated Tambov district official Luzhenovsky. Both women, at a young age, decided to forsake their privileges and family spheres, and instead devoted themselves to the revolutionary movement. They were women in an autocratic, patriarchal, and orthodox religious society who defied many social norms. They sought for themselves a role outside of the family sphere, they opposed the sacred role of the Romanovs, and turned to the traditionally male realms of politics, revolution, and violence in an attempt to turn around not only their own lives, but also those of the rest of the Russian population. They were remarkable women in remarkable times.

It is not surprising that Vera Figner and Maria Spiridonova have received much attention from historians who are interested in female participation in the Russian revolution. In the historiography, Figner and Spiridonova are often studied separately, or, when they are both mentioned, they are typified as women belonging to different generations of revolutionaries.[1] The unintentional result of such approaches is that there is

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[1] For studies in which they are studied separately, see for example: L.A. Hartnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner: Surviving the Russian Revolution* (Bloomington, IN 2014), S.N. Acker, Maria Spiridonova and the struggle for the social revolution (PhD-Dissertation History, The State University of New Jersey 1999) and S. Boniece,'The Spiridonova Case, 1906: Terror, Myth, and Martyrdom', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 4.3 (2003) 571-606. For studies in which they are typified as women belonging to different generations, see for example: A. Hillyar and J. McDermid, *Revolutionary Women in Russia, 1870-1917. A study in collective biography*

little attention for the fact that, despite the age gap of thirty years, these women shared several similarities. They came from similar backgrounds, chose to distance themselves from these backgrounds to become revolutionaries, embraced violent methods in the process, and they were, at least initially, hailed as revolutionary heroes in the wake of the 1917 revolution.

By taking the commonalities between Figner and Spiridonova as a starting point, this article explores their lives in a slightly different way than historians have traditionally done, namely through a side-by-side approach. The aim is not only to underline the similarities between them, but also to highlight how the 1917 revolution grew to mean different things for them. To do so, the guiding questions of this article are how Vera Figner and Maria Spiridonova contributed to the making of the revolution, and how they experienced it once it came. Was the revolution, that they fought and sacrificed so much for, what they hoped it would be? Or were they disappointed by it?

Apart from secondary literature, this article draws on several translated primary sources to answer these questions. For Vera Figner, the first source is her memoir, *Nacht over Rusland*, which offers valuable insights into how her aristocratic background and activities as a revolutionary shaped her and her views on the revolution.[2] Secondly, this article uses fragments from her writings and her trial statement of 1884, as recorded in the book *Five Sisters: Women against the Tsar* by Barbara Engel and Clifford Rosenthal.[3] For Maria Spiridonova, the first source is the biographical book *Maria Spiridonova in strijd met Tsaar en Sowjet* written by fellow revolutionary Isaac Steinberg, in which he uses fragments of Spiridonova's letters, writings, speeches and trial statements from the years 1906-1935.[4] The second source is the article 'Maria Spiridonova's "Last Testament"' by Alexander Rabinowitch, which includes

(Manchester 2000) and A. Knight, 'Female Terrorists in the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party', *The Russian Review* 38.2 (1979) 139-159.

[2] V. Figner, *Nacht over Rusland*, G.J Weruméus Buning-Ensink transl. (Amsterdam 1930).

[3] B. Engel and C. Rosenthal, *Five Sisters: Women against the Tsar* (Ithaca, NY 2013).

[4] I. Steinberg, *Maria Spiridonowa in strijd met Tsaar en Sowjet*, Titia Jelgersma transl. (Arnhem 1936). Steinberg, like Spiridonova after 1917, was a Left Socialist Revolutionary and acted as People's Commissar of Justice in the first Bolshevik government.

fragments of Spiridonova's writings from November 1937.[5] This text, written whilst she was imprisoned, provides insight into her experiences as a revolutionary, and they shed light on the lasting strength of her personal and political ideals.

The main concern with these sources is that they are not in the language in which they were originally written. This means that some of the original meaning, nuance and subtleties might have literally gotten lost in translation. Another concern that relates specifically to the work of Steinberg is that it is not always clear from his text which exact documents he uses. It is to be expected that his personal archives, that include a specific section on Maria Spiridonova, might be able to provide some clarification on this.[6] However, as this collection is not digitized and can only be accessed in the Center for Jewish History in New York, this could not be verified. Despite these shortcomings, which are recognized, these sources were nevertheless used. This is simply because they form the best option for the scholar who is not proficient in Russian and cannot read or easily access the originals.

Daughters, wives, mothers, revolutionaries? Women in nineteenth-century Russia

In nineteenth-century Russia, women were primarily defined as daughters, wives, and mothers. Family and custom law required unconditional obedience of children to parents, and wives to husbands. In practice this meant that men were granted the rights to chastise defiant children and wives. The subjection of women to the authority of the male head of the family was further reinforced by the religious doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church. It should be recognized, however, that religion also helped to consolidate and strengthen women. The Church praised qualities such as humility and the capacity for suffering and self-sacrifice. Women were considered to carry moral authority if they embodied such qualities. Russian women could thus

[5] A. Rabinowitch and M. Spiridonova, 'Maria Spiridonova's "Last Testament"', The Russian Review 54:4 (1995) 424-446.

[6] 'Papers of Isaac Nachman Steinberg (1888-1957)'. https://archives.cjh.org/agents/people/119036, accessed 25 October 2024.

derive significant satisfaction and strength from striving to live according to these noble precepts.[7]

In the first half of the nineteenth century, there were little to no options for women who sought for themselves a role outside the family sphere. And even when during the second half of the nineteenth century alternatives did become available to them, traditional expectations proved to be deeply engrained in society and remained unaltered for a long time. Stepping outside of the roles carved out for them by society required considerable courage. The family sphere, although by some perceived as confining, also provided women with protection and support.[8]

Despite these difficulties and challenges, there were women who tried to move outside of the family sphere to gain more autonomy over their own lives. One of the most significant ways they sought to achieve this was by pursuing an education. Interestingly, women often justified their desire for knowledge not by pointing out what good it would bring *them*, but what good it would bring *society*. They continued to perceive themselves as moral beings with a special capacity for self-sacrifice. In a way, they arguably substituted the duty to the family sphere with the duty to society.[9]

Dozens of women who pursued not only education, but also legitimate professional training, went to Zurich, where, unlike in Russia, women were already admitted to university. It was in this different and essentially freer environment that these women encountered and familiarized themselves with Western European movements and thought. For many of them, these were the first steps on the revolutionary path.[10] The populist revolutionary movement that emerged in the 1870s, most notably the organization Land and Liberty, would become a home to many of these professionally educated women. It was not just a place where they could meet like-minded people, but it also served as an emotional substitute for the family ties that they had generally given up.[11] Old habits proved hard to break, however, as these

[7] B. Engel, *Mothers and Daughters. Women of the Intelligentsia in nineteenth-century Russia* (Cambridge 1983) 3-19.
[8] Ibidem.
[9] Ibidem.
[10] Engel, *Mothers and Daughters*, 105-155; Figner, *Nacht over Rusland*, 62-77; Hillyar et al., *Revolutionary Women in Russia, 1870-1917*, 2-61 and R. Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930* (Princeton, NJ 1991) 126-154.
[11] Ibidem.

revolutionary women continued to emphasize qualities as dutifulness and self-sacrifice. In that sense they carried a gendered, moral dimension into the radical revolutionary movement.

From aristocratic girls to revolutionary spirits. The formative years of Vera Figner and Maria Spiridonova

The life of Vera Figner forms perhaps the most telling illustration of the just outlined trajectory. Born in 1852 in Kazan, she grew up in a traditional and patriarchal noble family. Although she largely abandoned the doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church as she grew up, she continued to hold on to the moral lessons and values it had taught her.[12] Inspired by the success story of Nadazhda Suslova, Russia's first female doctor, motivated by a desire to 'accomplish something good' and possibly also to be perceived as more than just a 'pretty doll', Figner grew determined to follow a similar path.[13] In 1872, against her parents' wishes, she travelled to Switzerland, accompanied by her husband and her sister to study medicine at the University of Zurich.[14]

In Zurich, Figner came into contact with revolutionary organizations, most notably the Fritsche Circle, which was a radical study group composed of thirteen women. This led her to question consequently her own beliefs and thoughts.[15] What stands out most in her description of this period is her honesty about her personal struggles, specifically her reluctance and hesitation to embrace revolutionary thought and to apply it to her own life. Being from noble birth, she realized that being a revolutionary would mean

[12] Figner, *Nacht over Rusland*, 26-27.

[13] For the first citation, see: Figner, *Nacht over Rusland*, 25 (translated). The second citation comes from her description of her childhood, in which she mentions how, as a fashionable girl, she was often praised for her appearance and her pretty face, yet that this adulation was quite limiting as most people perceived this to be her only noteworthy asset. See: Figner, *Nacht over Rusland*, 22-23. The citation can be found on page 23 (translated).

[14] Figner, *Nacht over Rusland*, 1-30; Writings of Vera Figner, as cited in: Engel et al., *Five Sisters*, 6.

[15] See for example: Figner, *Nacht over Rusland*, 31; 'From my first days in Zurich, I had been confronted by a whole series of questions, the existence of which I had never even suspected and which began to shake the views I had acquired – unconsciously in childhood, actively after I left school (…) and the "foundation" that I had built up by the age of nineteen began to be undermined from all sides.' (translated).

for her to give up her position, privileges, and way of life. Yet deep down she did not want to. Thus, when most of the Fritsche group decided to quit their studies and return to Russia, Figner was one of the two women who decided to stay behind:

> It tormented me that *I couldn't bring myself to do it*, too, that I didn't want to become a worker. (…) *A worker's life was horrible, inconceivable to me! The very idea made my blood run cold.*[16] (italics added)

Months passed, but in the autumn of 1875, she was visited by a fellow revolutionary who urged her to return to Russia.[17] Once again, she had to rethink what she wanted her life to look like and what it meant for her to be a revolutionary. Only a few months away from obtaining her doctor's diploma, she was hesitant to drop out of the program. At the same time, she felt that she could not 'give preference to *my pride, my vanity, and –alas!- my ambition*'[18] (italics added) over the needs of her revolutionary friends. And so, at twenty-three years old, estranged from her husband, she decided to break off her studies, and returned to Russia to devote herself to the revolution.[19]

Born in 1884 as the daughter of a minor noble, Maria Spiridonova grew up with the comforts and privileges of a well-to-do-family. The image that is created of Spiridonova in the biographical work by Sherron Nay Acker depicts a lively, fun-loving, yet also a considerably rebellious young girl.[20] Whereas Figner vividly describes her journey that led her to become a revolutionary, Spiridonova never entrusted this story to paper. The details of her radicalization are therefore unknown. What is clear, however, is that she was already politically active before she had left the local women's gymnasium and that, from the moment she joined the Socialist Revolutionary Party, she was zealously committed to the cause and developed into a powerful public speaker. One of her former peers from the gymnasium recalled how

[16] Writings of Vera Figner, as cited in: Engel et al., *Five Sisters*, 27.

[17] At this point, her female friends from the Fritsche circle had become part of the Moscow Organization. The man who visited Vera Figner was Mark Natanson. He told her that the Moscow Organization had fallen apart, and that her friends from the Fritsche circle had been arrested and that they needed her help. Upon her arrival in Russia, Figner found however that there was nothing she could do to help her friends. She decided not to return to Switzerland, but to remain in Russia.

[18] Writings of Vera Figner, as cited in: Engel et al., *Five Sisters*, 34.

[19] Ibidem, 35.

[20] Acker, Maria Spiridonova, 54-57.

Spiridonova strived to live her life completely in accordance with her ideals and moral convictions, rejecting comfort and opting for simplicity. One of the most significant ways she implemented this was through her choice of clothing. She wore the same, plain brown dress for one and a half years and continued to wear sober clothing throughout her life.[21]

In significant ways, clothing constructs and conveys information about one's social identity. Throughout history clothing has carried the power to differentiate between gender and groups, based, for example, on ethnicity, social class, or profession. It can tell a story about who one is and who one is not, yet it can also be a means to display who one aspires to be. Female revolutionaries in late nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Russia opted for an anti-spectacular and renunciatory display in their clothing. By turning away from frivolous female fineries, they aimed to construct and validate their identities as revolutionaries. Spiridonova's choice to dress plainly came from her wish to live in accordance with her ideals. Through clothing she unified word and deed, and as such, she managed to strengthen her moral authority as a devoted revolutionary.[22]

To conclude this part, the similarities in the formative years of Figner and Spiridonova seem primarily related to the specific social context that they grew up in. The age gap between them was apparently not so substantial that it meant that they grew up within significantly different environments. Instead, it could be argued that the differences between them seem primarily related to their personalities. When Figner travelled to Zurich to pursue an education, she did not necessarily do this to rebel against traditional society. Rather, she did this because she wanted to make herself useful and because she wanted to help others, thus reflecting the moral aspirations that many women at the time cherished.

This also helps explain why it took her some time to embrace revolutionary thought and its implications for her own life. She enjoyed the privileges that came with her social class, such as luxurious clothing, and she was hesitant to give it all up. Spiridonova, on the contrary, was already very spirited and rebellious from a young age. It can be concluded that, at least in this respect, Spiridonova did not experience the same personal struggle that Figner did. Once she familiarized herself with revolutionary thought, she

[21] Ibidem, 54-62.

[22] L. Patyk, 'Dressed to Kill and Die: Russian Revolutionary Terrorism, Gender, and Dress', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 58.2 (2010) 192-209.

passionately devoted herself to it and gave up her wealth and privileges in a heartbeat.

From revolutionary spirits to revolutionary acts.
The radical years of Vera Figner and Maria Spiridonova

Upon her return to Russia, Vera Figner became a member of the populist revolutionary organization Land and Liberty, and, after a few years, joined the Executive Committee of the more radical faction the People's Will. In the two years that followed, she helped to plan and prepare the assassination of the tsar. After a few failed attempts, the group succeeded in March 1881. Figner went into hiding, but was betrayed by a fellow revolutionary named Sergey Degayev and arrested in February 1883.[23] Although she was initially sentenced to death, her sentence was reduced to life imprisonment.

'If the death sentence would have been executed', she wrote in her memoir, 'I would have died calmly, *I was prepared to die*'[24] (italics added). In fact, during her imprisonment in Shlisselburg Fortress, she wondered whether dying for the revolutionary movement would have been preferable to being 'doomed to be locked in a cell for eternity (…) *Dying in prison… of old age, would that not be worse?*' (italics added).[25] She would never find out, however, because her sentence was further reduced to twenty years imprisonment. Between her release from Shlisselburg in 1904 and the 1917 revolution, she spent much time abroad in other countries, eventually returning to Russia and settling in Sint Petersburg in 1915.[26]

Historian Lynne Ann Hartnett draws attention to a fascinating paradox in the life of Figner that becomes particularly visible during her imprisonment. When Figner returned to Russia in 1875, she had argued that 'social concerns had gained ascendance over personal ones *for good*' (italics added). [27] Throughout her life, however, she remained very much conscious of her

[23] Engel et al., *Five Sisters*, 42-58.
[24] Figner, *Nacht over Rusland*, 177 [translated].
[25] Ibidem, 271 [translated].
[26] After her imprisonment she was sentenced to exile, yet 1906 she received permission to travel to Europe. Even from a distance she remained a dedicated revolutionary, exemplified by the many public appearances and speeches she made there. See: Hartnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner*, 179-204.
[27] Writings of Vera Figner, as cited in: Engel et al., *Five Sisters*, 35.

noble background. What is more, the customs and privileges that she had grown up with proved hard to abandon. As such, she felt entitled to complain that one of the wardens in Shlisselburg Fortress spoke to her 'in a way that *respectable people* do not even use with *servants*' (italics added).[28] She also never lost her taste for the social and material niceties that her social status traditionally afforded her.[29]

In January 1906, Spiridonova assassinated Tambov district official Luzhenovsky. This action was part of the broader local Socialist Revolutionary Party's response against the repression and violence that representatives of the government used against the peasants in the area. She was arrested on the spot and brought to the local police station. She was interrogated and suffered from physical and sexual abuse, which she commented on extensively in a letter to her friends and comrades. According to Steinberg, she wrote that her abusers 'displayed a talent for torture that Ivan the Terrible would have envied them for.'[30] The letter was published in the liberal newspaper *Rus* and provoked widespread outrage amongst the Russian population. It turned her into a revolutionary heroine.[31]

In this letter she also mentioned that on the day of the assassination she was 'dressed up as a schoolgirl, blushing, cheerful and calm', and that as such she 'aroused no suspicion.[32] For female revolutionaries who participated in armed struggle, there were not just ideological but also practical aspects to consider when it came to dressing themselves. Their clothing had to allow for physical mobility and the concealment of weapons, yet, perhaps most importantly, also served to elude suspicion. For Spiridonova, who was a mere 147 centimetres in height, dressing up as a schoolgirl proved a successful disguise.[33]

Once captured, she expected to be sentenced to death and accepted her fate. The letters and court testimony, as included by Steinberg, express her willingness to die for the revolutionary cause.[34] In fact, when her death

[28] As cited in Hartnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner*, 157.
[29] Ibidem, 157-158.
[30] Steinberg, *Maria Spiridonova*, 24-28. Citation can be found on page 25 [translated].
[31] Rabinowitch, 'Maria Spiridonova's "Last Testament"', 425.
[32] Letter of Maria Spiridonova, as found in: Steinberg, *Maria Spiridonova*, 24 (translated).
[33] Acker, Maria Spiridonova, 59.
[34] Steinberg, *Maria Spiridonova*, 24-49. The letter that is included on page 44 states: 'I dream that I am being hanged. I long for it strongly, and I would not know what to

sentence got reduced to life imprisonment due to unrest among the population, she was outright disappointed:

> My death seemed so significant to me from a societal point of view, and I expected it with such certainty, that *the withdrawal of the verdict and its alteration to life imprisonment have badly affected me*: I do not feel good… Let me put it like this: it is hard for me! *I hate the autocracy so much that I do not desire their favours*.[35] (italics added)

Despite her disapproval, she received their 'favour' and was transferred to a women's prison in Siberia, where she remained until she was released in the wake of the 1917 revolution.[36]

Figner's and Spiridonova's turns to violence might seem remarkable given that these women continuously emphasized their moral outlook on life. It is important to understand, however, that for them there was nothing unethical or immoral about the choices they made. Figner's 1884 trial statement - in which she explained that for her, violence was essentially the last resort - sheds ample light on this.[37] Once she had joined the People's Will, she felt 'a moral obligation'[38] to not only accept violence in theory, but also to participate directly in the violent acts that the organization would undertake. She felt this obligation because she 'had always demanded that a person - myself as well as others - be consistent', to 'harmonize word and deed'. [39] Even though some people might have regarded her deeds as 'bloodthirsty' and 'terrible and incomprehensible', she argued that they 'were prompted by motives that, to me in any event, have *an honorable basis*.' [40] (italics added).

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do when the autocracy would pardon me. I do not want their pardon… I consider my death so significant from a societal point of view that I would conceive of grace as revenge, as a new scorn' [translated].

[35] Letter from Maria Spiridonova, as found in: Steinberg, *Maria Spiridonova*, 49.

[36] Steinberg, *Maria Spiridonova*; Acker, Maria Spiridonova, 86-87; S. Boniece, 'The Shesterka of 1905-06: Terrorist Heroines of Revolutionary Russia', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 58.2 (2010) 172-191: 172-173.

[37] Vera Figner's 1884 trial statement, as cited in: Engel et al., *Five Sisters*, 43. In it, she says: 'If any group in our society had shown me a path other than violence, perhaps I would have followed it; at the very least, I would have tried it out.'

[38] Ibidem.

[39] Ibidem.

[40] Ibidem.

From her point of view, these actions in no way discredited her. This is because her morality did not find expression in her rejection of violence, but precisely in her embracement of it. This is why she considered the betrayal of Degayev, which gave her and fellow revolutionaries a 'moral shock' and made her feel 'as though she had fallen from her highest ideals in the filthiest mud', to be more immoral than her own participation in the assassination of the tsar.[41] Killing the enemy could be morally justified, but the betrayal of a revolutionary friend was utterly reprehensible.

Historian Amy Knight argues that the generation of radical female revolutionaries to which Figner belonged differed fundamentally from the generation of Spiridonova. Her main argument is that the latter generation was not necessarily motivated by rational political concerns. Rather, their emotional investment and their will to heroic martyrdom prevented them from separating personal motives from political and social goals. She argues that for some women, and specifically includes Spiridonova as an example, their willingness to die originated from a feeling that they had to expiate their deeds by sacrificing their own lives. 'Though they rationally accepted the idea that the revolutionary cause justified such killing', she states, 'they could not live with their feelings of guilt', because they were unable 'to reconcile terror with personal morality'[42].

As far as can be ascertained from the selected primary sources, however, Spiridonova never exhibited any feelings of guilt following the assassination of Luzhenovsky. Her willingness to die afterwards seems to be first and foremost because she believed it would aid the revolutionary movement, not because she questioned the morality of her own actions. In an open letter she wrote to the Bolsheviks in 1918, she outlined on which grounds she believed violent actions could be approved of. If violence was used as a means to wake up and emancipate the masses, and if the revolutionary displayed self-sacrificing qualities, it was morally justified.[43] In her 'Last Testament' written in 1937, she furthermore highlighted that it was permissible to kill, 'but only when there are no other means at hand to defend the revolution.' [44] This reflects her 1906 trial statement, in which she

[41] For the citations, see Figner, *Nacht over Rusland*, 160 and 162 ([translated]).
[42] Knight, 'Female Terrorists', 151.
[43] 'Open Letter to the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party', as found in: Steinberg, *Maria Spiridonova*, 238.
[44] Rabinowitch, 'Maria Spiridonova's "Last Testament"', 444.

emphasized that Luzhenovsky was assassinated because 'he was an oppressor of the people, and he could *only* be restrained through death' (italics added).[45]

Like Figner, Spiridonova suggested that violence was justified, provided it was motivated by a desire to aid the revolution and only if no other option was available. They believed their own actions contained both elements, and therefore felt comfortable to emphasize the morality of their actions throughout their lives. As such, they exhibited no guilt or remorse. There might have been women within the Socialist Revolutionary Party who struggled with their use of violence, but Spiridonova does not seem to have been among them.[46]

In sum, although they had used violence to different degrees (Figner helped plan and prepare an assassination, Spiridonova assassinated someone herself), they both accepted the consequences of their actions and would have willingly given their lives for the revolutionary cause. In fact, suffering hardships and their self-renunciation made their moral aspirations shine even brighter. Dying for the revolutionary cause would have meant to die for something bigger than themselves, to die an honourable death. As such they did not fear it. In 1906, Spiridonova wrote: 'Do you not know that I belong to those, who laugh at the cross? I will laugh in prison. Because one suffers for an ideal, and the ideal is so beautiful, that all personal feelings fade.'[47]

Revolutionary heroes? The post-1917 years of Vera Figner and Maria Spiridonova

When the February revolution of 1917 shocked Russia and the rest of the world, Figner was already in her sixties. Despite her age, these promising times prompted her to once again lent herself and her voice to the

[45] Maria Spiridonova's 1906 trial statement, as found in: Steinberg, *Maria Spiridonova*, 39.

[46] Although Spiridonova herself was able to justify her use of violence, many conservative Russians did judge her for it. See for example: N. Petrusenko, 'A Female Agent of Political Violence in Pre-revolutionary Russia: Gendered Representations of Maria Spiridonova', *Kaleidoscope: Journal of History of Culture, Science and Medicine* 5.9 (2014) 232-249: 236-238.

[47] Steinberg, *Maria Spiridonova*, 292 ([translated]). In the book, the literal phrasing is as follows: 'Weet gij niet,dat ik behoor tot degenen, die lachen aan het kruis?' This reiterates how she embodied her status as revolutionary martyr.

revolutionary cause. She gave many speeches and was hailed and treated by the crowds as 'revolutionary nobility'.[48] As the revolutionary bliss wore off in the months after the revolution and national unity and optimism faded away, deep societal differences and internal conflicts within the revolutionary movement increasingly came to the fore.

For Figner, who was politically active yet never chose to definitively affiliate herself with one party, this complicated political landscape overwhelmed and estranged her from the revolution as it unfolded in 1917. Although Figner would never fully support the Bolsheviks, she refrained from directly opposing them. Her biographer Hartnett argues that she kept quiet as a means of self-preservation, which, given her age, seems a credible argument to make. In the end, she accepted and reconciled with the inevitability of the Bolshevik victory and chose to work within the system rather than to actively challenge it.[49]

When Spiridonova was released from prison in the wake of the February Revolution, she took a different path than Figner and placed herself at the fore of the political arena. When internal conflicts caused the Socialist Revolutionary Party to split, she joined the leftist faction, the Left SR, and immediately assumed a leadership role. In this she distinguished herself from other revolutionary women at that time, not only among those in Russia, but among those in Europe as well.[50]

When the Provisional Government reinstated the death penalty, which it had previously abolished, Spiridonova was furious. She commented on it extensively in an article she published, in which she argued that 'a democracy that resorts to such degrading methods, forges its own shackles' and blamed the Provisional Government for the 'moral decay of the revolution'.[51] To her, upholding the moral character of the revolution was vital. This also becomes clear on the first Left SR's party congress in November 1917 in which Spiridonova made the following speech:

> Friends! *We are not a young party, our glorious predecessors worked already in the 60's and 70's.* As we have such a long history, we want to remind ourselves on which principle the party is build. *It was the principle of the*

[48] Hartnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner*, 206.
[49] Hartnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner*, 205-261; Haruki, 'Vera Figner', 44-45.
[50] Steinberg, *Maria Spiridonova*, 173-183.
[51] Article written by Maria Spiridonova, as found in: Steinberg, *Maria Spiridonova*, 178 ([translated]).

> *highest morality*. (…) Friends, particularly in this time of fierce conflict we, social-revolutionaries, should clear the atmosphere, resurrect the idealism from the reserves that *the holy warriors of the past* have left behind for us. (italics added)

She not only emphasized the importance of morality, but also legitimized the existence of the Left SRs by claiming that their party was the natural successor of the revolutionary movement to which Vera Figner belonged.

The Left SRs criticism of the Provisional Government made Spiridonova applaud the October Revolution and led the Left SR and the Bolsheviks to work together. However, over time substantial differences between the two parties came to the fore and tensions grew. They led to an outburst on the Fifth Soviet Congress in July 1918 during which Spiridonova directly accused the Bolsheviks of betraying the revolution, whilst, according to Steinberg, 'she continuously slammed on the table with a small, silver revolver.'[52] The Left SR had organized for the assassination of the German count Von Mirbach to take place during the congress, hoping it would cause, among other things, the Germans to nullify the Treaty of Brest Litovsk. Their attempt failed miserably. The Bolsheviks used the assassination as an opportunity to get rid of the Left SRs and reframed it as proof of a Left SR conspiracy against Soviet Power. Spiridonova and her colleagues were arrested by the Bolsheviks. It was a turning point for Spiridonova. There was no longer a place for her in the increasingly oppressive political system.[53]

Conclusion

In conclusion, Vera Figner and Maria Spiridonova responded differently to the 1917-revolution. The ways in which they chose to do so illustrate that they indeed belonged to different generations of revolutionaries. Overwhelmed by the situation, Figner chose not to challenge, but to work within the Bolshevik system. Spiridonova, however, was not intimidated by the chaotic political situation. If anything, the fact that she assumed a leadership role so quickly and zealously suggests that she thrived in it. Although Figner and Spiridonova both grew to disagree with the revolution as it unfolded in 1917 and 1918, they continued to believe in the revolution

[52] Ibidem, 214 ([translated]).
[53] Rabinowitch, 'Maria Spiridonova's "Last Testament"', 427.

as such. 'This system is wrong', a disillusioned Spiridonova argued in December 1918, 'but socialism is true and attainable.'[54] And thus, they continued to work to turn their revolutionary dreams into reality, albeit in different ways. The consequences of these choices are perhaps best illustrated by their deaths. In September 1941, Maria Spiridonova, together with 156 other prisoners, was executed by the Soviet government in the Medvedev Woods.[55] Nine months later, Vera Figner died in Moscow as an esteemed old revolutionary, with half a page of the communist party newspaper *Pravda* dedicated to her.[56]

It is precisely the side-by-side approach used in this article that sheds light on a fascinating aspect that comes into play when talking about the lives of these female revolutionaries. The choices they made not only reflect their social backgrounds, the specific historical contexts they found themselves in and the distinct generations of revolutionaries to which they belonged. Their choices also reflect their unique personalities. Vera Figner was very careful and cautious before she chose to devote her life to the revolution and seems to have been just as cautious in her decision making when she found herself disagreeing with its course after 1917. Her personality also shines through in the fact that she was never able to fully distance herself from her social background and the material things and privileges it afforded her. Maria Spiridonova, on the other hand, was already from a young age far more rebellious and fierier. Her devotion to the revolutionary cause was intense and unconditional, reflected in both her willingness to kill as in her choice to oppose the Bolsheviks.

Although historians like Knight have rightfully highlighted the importance of the different historical contexts these women found themselves in as well as the age gap between them, this article proposes that their unique personalities also played an important role in the choices they made. This article thus reiterates that, if historians want to understand the making of the 1917 revolution, it is vital that they not only study the significant political events surrounding it. Analysing the intricacies that made up the lives of individual revolutionaries is just as important.

[54] Speech of Maria Spiridonova from 1918, as found in: Steinberg, *Maria Spiridonova*, 242 [translated].
[55] Rabinowitch, 'Maria Spiridonova's "Last Testament"', 445.
[56] Hartnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner*, 258.