

Lynne Ann Hartnett, *The Defiant Life of Vera Figner: Surviving the Russian Revolution*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014. xvii, 324pp., Bibliography, Index. ISBN 978-0-253-01284-5. \$35.00 cloth.

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Dodging Tsarist capital punishment, living through twenty years' imprisonment in the "Russian Bastille," avoiding the Cheka and Stalin's purges, and dying at age ninety as German invaders besieged Moscow, the populist revolutionary Vera Nikolaevna Figner (1842-1942) was the ultimate defiant survivor. Born to a gentry family in central Russia, she outlived key figures of the pre-revolutionary opposition such as Peter Kropotkin, Vera Zasulich, Socialist Revolutionaries Catherine Breshko-Breshkovskaia and Maria Spiridonova, and Mensheviks Julius Martov and Pavel Axelrod. After the Bolshevik Revolution, Lenin, Trotsky, Armand, Krupskaja, and Bukharin, were among the many of her revolutionary contemporaries who succumbed, either naturally or unnaturally, before Figner.

Lynne Ann Hartnett has been working on the life of Vera Figner since she was a graduate student. The results of her long labors, dedication, and passion for learning about Figner are evident in this biography. Hartnett organizes her work chronologically with ample contextual information. She has done her homework; her extensive bibliography includes references to archival research at the main Russian history and literature archives in Moscow and St. Petersburg, at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, and at the Hoover Institute at Stanford, as well as a plethora of Russian and English print sources.

The outlines of Figner's story are well told Hartnett. There was little in her childhood that would have presaged her later radicalism. The eldest child of six, Vera grew up in the central Russian Tetiushi district, on two estates, largely oblivious to the peasants who served her family and tilled the earth around the manor houses. Her parents had a typical Russian gentry marriage of the time. Ekaterina Khristoforovna Kuprianova was eighteen when her parents arranged her marriage to Nikolai Alexandrovich Figner, fifteen years her senior. Nikolai was a martinet; Ekaterina silently suffered. But the established order of the family and Russia at large was shaken by Tsar Alexander II's Great Reforms, beginning with the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. The secret police intruded when Vera's Polish uncle was arrested briefly after the 1863 Polish uprising. Later Figner claimed that this was a key event in her radicalization.

Gender differences mattered. As a woman, Figner's options for leaving her family were limited. Her physical beauty helped her attract male admirers. At age 18, she married Alexei Filippov, the smitten scion of a wealthy family. The two traveled to Zurich, where Vera started medical studies. It was here that she became part of the progressive circles of Russians, thriving in the freer air of the Swiss city. Figner's rapid radicalization soon led to her divorcing Filippov, abandoning medical school, embracing terrorism, and playing a key role in the People's Will and the ultimately successful assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. For this, Figner was condemned to death, her sentence commuted to life imprisonment in the Schlesselberg Fortress. She was released on September 29, 1904, and then began an odyssey through the final days of

the Romanov dynasty, the 1905 and February and October 1917 Revolutions, Lenin, Stalin, and the outbreak of World War Two.

Hartnett is particularly good at tracing Figner's evolution after her release from Schlisselberg and how through her memoirs, lectures, and advocacy for political prisoners and the downtrodden in general, she fashioned her public persona as the self-sacrificing idealist willing to give her life to the revolutionary cause. Her beauty and class helped. Attracted to her appearance and noble bearing, revolutionaries abandoned the new ways for the old. The Old Bolshevik Bukharin, spellbound, kissed her hand upon seeing her.

Figner never joined the Communist Party; given how many Communists died during the purges, this may have helped her stay alive. Her family and friendship connections sustained her materially through the many upheavals of war, revolution, and post-revolutionary Soviet times. And the physical ailments plaguing her, many the result of her imprisonment, also saved her. As she aged, she was often hospitalized or otherwise incapacitated and thus not a visible target during the worst of the Stalinist purges.

Several themes could have been explored more in this biography. Figner made connections as early as 1906 with Russia's emerging women's rights movement. She, along with Poliksena Shishkina-Iavein, led the March 19, 1917 Petrograd demonstration that resulted in Russian women winning suffrage. Was she a feminist or allowing herself to be coopted? And throughout her life, what were the keys to Figner's overall survival? Hartnett argues astutely that Figner's carefully crafted image as the ultimate self-sacrificing revolutionary, a secular female saint, aided her in Tsarist and Soviet times. But she portrays Figner as essentially a tragic figure. She notes: "The sad truth of her later years was that even though she was 'surrounded by almost universal worship', she was emotionally isolated....Now an elderly woman, she continued to view marriage and motherhood as a vise just as she did as a teen." (248-249)

It is not clear that Figner's eschewing a traditional heterosexual marriage for most of her life left her bitter and emotionally bereft. From the evidence Hartnett provides, Figner derived sustenance from her family and from a network of mostly female friends. Research about same sex friendships among married and unmarried female activists has indicated the importance of homosocial relationships. Vera Figner got generally positive marks for her public persona as a radical political activist. More attention to the web of same and opposite sex personal relationships which sustained her private life could enrich our understanding of Figner's alternative personal path. Finally, Hartnett refers to Figner and most of the women in the book using their first names, but uses last names for most of the men cited in the book. She does not explain why.

Overall, Lynne Ann Hartnett has done an admirable job in condensing Vera Figner's life into this one volume. She has devoted great time and energy to this project and deserves much commendation for her efforts and commitment to her subject. Hartnett's biography of Vera Figner provides an important addition to the English language scholarship about this prototypical Russian revolutionary heroine.