

Research Report

My current project is to revise and expand my dissertation (Indiana University, 1995) into a full-length biography, tentatively titled "Mariia Spiridonova, 1884-1941: Feminine Martyrdom and Revolutionary Mythmaking." My dissertation examined the life and political activities of this prominent Left Socialist Revolutionary (SR) terrorist from her birth to the expulsion of the Left SR party from the Soviet government in July 1918. I spent the months of June, July and August 2000 in Moscow, concluding my research on Spiridonova's life from mid-1918 until her death in 1941.

Spiridonova became a popular myth and martyr during the first Russian revolution of 1905-07, when she was beaten and allegedly raped by police after fatally wounding a notorious Tambov official. The liberal press, which depicted Spiridonova as a beautiful, chaste and gently bred young girl befouled by cruel officialdom, defended the justice of her terrorist act as passionately as did the socialists: she had killed an oppressor to save the local peasantry from his whip. In addition, the liberals blamed Spiridonova's advanced tuberculosis on the beating she had suffered at the time of her arrest.

Condemned to serve a life sentence in a remote Siberian prison complex, Spiridonova was liberated by the February revolution of 1917. Her charisma as a public speaker, enhanced by her myth of martyrdom, drew her to the forefront of critical events in Petrograd and Moscow in 1917-18. One of the most prominent leaders of the Left SR party, she attracted tremendous peasant support for the October revolution and the new Bolshevik-Left SR government, which she served as chairperson of the national congress of peasants' soviets. However, Spiridonova turned against Bolshevik policy after the signing of a "shameful" peace treaty with imperial Germany in the spring of 1918, and in July she participated in an unsuccessful Left SR attempt to incite a popular uprising against the treaty. Her "second martyrdom" began with the expulsion of the Left SRs from the government and her own incarceration in a Kremlin cell. From that time on, she lived either in prison, in the underground, under house arrest, in exile or in a sanatorium (during periods of exacerbated tuberculosis), until her execution on Stalin's orders during the German invasion in 1941.

In my research, I have been exploring how the male-dominated Left SRs as well as Spiridonova herself employed the myth of her martyrdom to advance the revolution. I am particularly interested in discovering why and how the Spiridonova myth remained a threat to the Soviet government in the 1920s and 1930s. A secondary objective has been to deepen my understanding of Spiridonova's chronic illness, namely how it influenced her decisions and actions. Thus my work encompasses issues of gender and the sociocultural framing of disease as well as issues of revolution, civil war and terrorism.

Barbara Evans Clements has remarked in her recent work *Bolshevik Women* that "[studying] the operation of gender ideas among Russia's communist revolutionaries . . . may soon become one of the most fruitful remaining lines of research into the history of

the Communist Party. Gender is a relatively new category of analysis, and few scholars have applied it to the Bolsheviks.”¹ The SRs, who as a matter of course receive far less scholarly attention than the party that came to power in 1917, have yet to undergo any form of gender analysis in a published monograph. That SRs and Left SRs continued to play a political role in the civil war years is another little-studied aspect of their history. Finally, Spiridonova lived most of the 1920s and 1930s as a political exile, a facet of the Soviet experience that has so far gone unexplored.²

My dissertation, which covered Spiridonova’s life up to mid-1918, was based on extensive research in 1992 in recently declassified Russian archives, specifically the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) and the Russian State Archive for Social and Political History (RGASPI, then known as RTsKhIDNI and before that as the Central Party Archive) in Moscow; I also worked in the Lenin State Library, Moscow and Khimki, at the INION (Academy of Sciences Institute of Scientific Information) Library, Moscow, and at the Moscow State Historical Library. In the summer of 2000, I conducted my research on Spiridonova’s life after 1918 in GARF, RGASPI, the Central State Archive of the Moscow Region (TsGAMO) and the State Socio-Political Library (GOPB, formerly the library of the Central Party Archive).

To be frank, I have found the post-1918 period of Spiridonova’s life far more challenging to study. At the point at which her political position became illegal, the available material starts drying up, her party no longer being a participant in the primary organs of the Soviet government. It is indeed ironic that the most important records of the Left SRs’ activities after that year have been preserved by the Communist party that they opposed. Nevertheless, the newspapers, pamphlets and documents that I examined this summer tell a fascinating story that perhaps explains why Spiridonova and the Left SRs continued to wage what seems to us, with hindsight, a hopeless struggle against the institution of Communism in Russia.

From reading Left SR newspapers, pamphlets, circulars and protocols of party conferences, all of these now located in the former Communist party archive and its library, I have learned there was sufficient worker discontent with the early phase of Lenin’s New Economic Policy in 1921-22 to convince the Left SRs that the Communists could be voted out of power, if only free and open elections to the workers’ soviets (councils) could be held. This, of course, the Communists would never allow, but the Left SRs maintained their faith in their own revolutionary principles, agitating for democratization and economic reform until imprisonment and exile by the government put a stop to their campaign. Though they have often been characterized as naïve fools for their efforts, by contemporaries as well as historians, I have come to admire the Left SRs’ courage and energy in opposing a state apparatus whose growing menace they recognized acutely.

I was unable to gain access to the largest existing collection of Left SR materials, which are unsurprisingly housed in the central archive of the former KGB. However, the eminent Russian historian A. Litvin has recently published an extensive number of documents from that collection, entitled Levye esery i VChK (The Left SRs and the Cheka, Kazan, 1996). The published KGB documents will be particularly helpful for my reconstruction of Spiridonova’s life during the later 1920s and the 1930s, when she was in Central Asian exile. I am also aided in this effort by Spiridonova’s correspondence with her fellow Left SR leader and close friend I. Z. Steinberg, copies of which I earlier obtained from the Steinberg archive at YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York.

From my experience of working in Russian archives, I have observed that there remains much to be studied about the civil war period and the early 1920s, the formative years of the Soviet state. We historians are still far from a full answer to the question of how Stalin came to power, and the question itself is much more complex than we have made it. But a major concern for future researchers will be the nature of the Putin regime and its policy regarding Russian archives and libraries, whose facilities are steadily deteriorating and whose staff are sadly underpaid.

¹ Barbara Evans Clements, Bolshevik Women (Cambridge, 1997), 11-12.

² Western scholarship on the SRs includes Oliver H. Radkey, The Agrarian Foes of Bolshevism: Promise and Default of the Russian Socialist Revolutionaries, February to October 1917 (New York, 1958) and The Sickie under the Hammer: The Russian Socialist Revolutionaries in the Early Months of Soviet Rule (New York, 1963); Michael Melancon, The Socialist Revolutionaries and the Russian Anti-War Movement, 1914-17 (Columbus, Ohio, 1990); Lutz Haefner, Der Partei der linken Sozialrevolutionaere in der russischen Revolution von 1917/18 (Cologne, 1994). Scott Smith has ventured into the early civil war period in a recent published essay, "The Socialist Revolutionaries and the Dilemma of Civil War," in The Bolsheviks in Russian Society: The Revolution and the Civil Wars, ed. Vladimir Brovkin (New Haven and London, 1997). Spiridonova receives a paragraph of attention in Richard Stites, The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism and Bolshevism, 1860-1930 (Princeton, 1978) and a sentence in Clements's Bolshevik Women.