
Solon’s sobering maxim “Call no man happy until he is dead” seems particularly apt in the case of Vera Nikolaevna Figner, the implacable radical activist, leader of the People’s Will, and revolutionary icon who is the subject of Lynne Ann Hartnett’s critical biography, The Defiant Life of Vera Figner. Hartnett’s subtitle, “Surviving the Russian Revolution” goes far in explaining why. Figner endured twenty years in the fortress island prison, Schlisselburg, (the Russian Bastille) for her participation in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 before she was released upon her mother’s personal appeal to Nicholas II in 1904. This ought to have been the “happy end” for the physically and psychologically battered but spiritually unbroken Figner, who was by then well into middle age. Instead, Figner lived on to survive two revolutions (1905 and 1917), civil war, and the Stalinist terror, only to write with her dying breath articles praising Soviet women’s heroism in the face of the Nazi advance. Figner’s latter years were as full of tribulation and triumph, of struggle, heartbreak, and loss as her embattled years as a revolutionary terrorist and political prisoner; therefore, Hartnett emplots her life as above all the story of a survivor. While in her radical days Figner wished for nothing so devoutly as martyrdom and after 1917 was venerated for her self-sacrifice on behalf of the revolutionary cause, she was, paradoxically, the martyr who survived. Not only did she survive, but she immortalized her martyrdom and that of her comrades in her two-volume memoir Zapechatlennyi trud (Commemorative Work), though her collected works run to seven volumes.

For Hartnett, this superabundance of material poses a challenge opposite that faced by the biographer without a single extant word verifiably attributable to their subject. Figner, with her voluminous writing and exacting editing, seems to have sought to preempt any version of her life other than her own authorized and definitive version. The question then becomes: how does a biographer critically retell Figner’s own life in a way that is more insightful and revelatory than Figner herself, who has told it so exhaustively and with no small degree of introspection, nuance, and artistry? Hartnett makes two decisions with crucial implications for her study. First, she chooses to conscientiously chronicle Figner’s life and recapitulates the narrative of events set down in Figner’s memoirs while providing judicious context for the non-specialist reader. Second, she assiduously channels Figner’s own words into a few innocuous quotations, presumably to keep autobiography from flooding the banks of her biography.
Without question the most important contribution of Hartnett’s biography is her capture of the long arc of Figner’s life. The short and charismatic arc of Figner’s leadership of the first modern terrorist organization, the People’s Will, is well known and frequently excerpted in Russian history readers. But Figner’s roles as a cultural figure and public activist both before and especially after the 1917 revolution have been hardly touched upon. Despite the infirmities visited on her by Schlisselburg and old age, and the restrictions imposed by the tsarist and Soviet governments in turn, Figner was remarkably active well into her seventies. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the younger generation of Socialist Revolutionaries lost no time in elevating her to the status of revolutionary icon, and the Bolsheviks also found it to their advantage to enshrine her in their revolutionary pantheon. As a living legend she remained an activist and any one of her numerous commitments is impressive and well worth a separate study. Figner’s initiative in founding and leading the Committee to Aid Political Prisoners, also known as the Political Red Cross, is likely the most fascinating and consequential of these. In 1910 Figner revived and rebranded what had first taken shape in the early 1880s as the Red Cross of the People’s Will and capitalized upon her own prison ordeal in order to draw attention to the plight of political prisoners and exiles in Russia. Her fundraising efforts were tremendously successful, and despite an increasingly inhospitable political climate the organization persevered in its delicate mission of championing the rights of political prisoners well into the Soviet era.

As Hartnett emphasizes, these commitments were to specific causes and endeavors rather than to a political party. Perhaps Figner’s greatest act of defiance was to remain independent in the rabidly partisan atmosphere that persisted from the late imperial period through the Civil War and was ultimately ossified in the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy of Stalinist Russia. Such defiance required a degree of savvy, and more sadly, a degree of irrelevance. Figner was appalled by – and protested – the Bolshevik usurpation of power and the ruthless persecution of political opponents on the left. But the principled objections from this prim and infirm old woman constituted no real threat to Soviet power, and by the 1930s Figner’s declining health coincided with the Stalinist purges to silence and thereby save her for a natural rather than unnatural death.

Figner’s voice was her most cherished instrument, one she lived in fear of losing and so took exquisite pains to preserve in her writing. Hartnett takes too little advantage of this phenomenal resource, with the consequence that Figner is placed at an unnecessary remove from the reader when she could be so close. This also deprives Hartnett’s reader of the opportunity to experience Figner as a writer (and craftswoman), which was her found vocation in the latter half of