

Maltsev Prison (right hand side, middle distance, with white wall) and its associated settlement. Note the bleak landscape.

Anarchist Women in Maltsev Prison 1907–1908

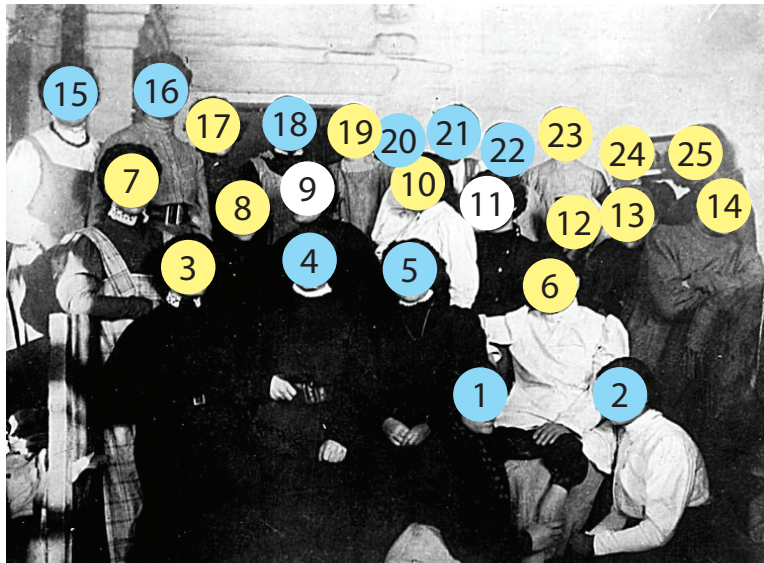
In the wake of the failed Russian revolution of 1905–1906, the tsarist government established a prison for women “terrorists” in eastern Siberia. Maltsev Prison, in a remote mining district near the border with China, already housed “common” women criminals, but from 1907 to 1911 also held dozens of women convicted of violent revolutionary acts, the most famous being Maria Spiridonova, assassin of a brutal tsarist official.

Half these women were members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs) while the other half were divided between anarchists (mostly anarcho-communists) and social democrats (SDs, including members of the Jewish Bund).

These prisoners organized themselves as a commune, sharing food, books, and parcels from home. Although technically sentenced to *katorga* (hard labour), in practice they were able to spend most of their time educating themselves—a sort of free university.

The photo below of the Maltsev prisoners was taken in 1908: of the 25 women in the photo, thirteen were members of the SR Party, while ten were anarcho-communists.





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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Polina Osipovna Shakerman, (AC, 1888) 2. Frida Semenovna Novik, (AC, 1886) 3. Sophia Adolfovna Polyak, (SR, 1878) 4. Roza Grigorevna Maidenberg-Gershkovich, (AC, 1882) 5. Yekaterina Ilinichna Erdelevskaya, (AC, 1877) 6. Maria Vasilevna Stepanov-Okushko, (SR, 1855) 7. Anna Savelevna Pigit, (SR, 1884) 8. Maria Aleksandrovna Spiridonova (SR, 1884) 9. Zhigul (common criminal) 10. Zisla-Zinaida Samoilovna Bronshtein-Stanislavskaya (SR, 1884) 11. Vera Isayevna Gorovits (SD, 1888) 12. Anastasia Alekseyevna Bitsenko-Kameristaya, (SR, 1876) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 13. Maria Arkalevna Benevskaya (SR, 1876) 14. Yelizaveta Pavlovna Zvereva (SR, 1872) 15. Maria Kirillovna Borodyukova (AC, 1887) 16. Nadezhda Yakovlevna Derkach (AC, 1883) 17. Vera Vasilevna Shtolterfot (SR, 1884) 18. Paulina Frantsevna Metter (AC, 1875) 19. Maria Markovna Skolnik (SR, 1885) 20. Sophia Semenovna Novitskaya (AC, ?) 21. Austra Khristoforovna Tiavais (AC, 1888) 22. Sura Oizerovna Rotkopf (AC, ?) 23. Yekaterina Aleksandrovna Bibergal (SR, 1881) 24. Nadezhda Andreyevna Terentieva (SR, 1888) 25. Revekka Moiseyevna Rialka-Rachinskaya (SR, 1888) |
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Note: SR = Socialist-Revolutionary Party, AC = Anarcho-Communist, SD = Social-Democrat. The year in brackets is the year of birth.

Prisoner #9, Zhigul, was not a political prisoner, but one of the common criminals also imprisoned at Maltsev. The political convicts reached out to these women and offered them instruction in basic literacy. Many of the non-political prisoners had children living with them, and the politicals made a special effort to contribute to the health and education of these youngsters. After the first year, the prison ad-

ministration insisted on strict segregation of political and non-political prisoners, but contact continued by illegal means. Only one of the political prisoners had a child living with them—the anarchist Roza Maidenberg. Her daughter, born in prison in 1906 and known as Ivochka, was the darling of the whole group. Biographies of the ten anarchist prisoners, compiled by Sergei Ovsiannikov, are given below.



№1: **Polina Osipovna (Khana Avrumovna, Khasya Perianova) Shakerman** (1888, Khmelnik, Podolskaya gubernia—February 26 1933). A worker, in 1904–1905 she belonged to organizations of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party in Podolskaya gubernia and Odessa. In 1905 she joined the Odessa Anarcho-Communist Workers' Group. She took part

in throwing bombs at police, expropriations, the murder of the police superintendent Pogrebny, and an attempt on the life of the police officer Poltavshchenko. Arrested in April 1906 in Odessa, she was sentenced to death by a military court on May 8 1906. On August 28 1906 this sentence was commuted to an indefinite period of *katorga*. In 1917 she joined the Bolshevik Party, but resigned in 1922. She joined the All-Union Society of Former Political Prisoners and Exiles (OPK) in 1924.



№2: **Frida Semenovna (Freida Simkhelevna) Novik** (March 20 1886, Lyadki, Grogenskaya gubernia—February 3 1970, Moscow). A worker, in 1902—1903 she belonged to the Białystok organization of the Bund.^[1] In 1904 she joined the Anarcho-Communist International Group “Borba” [Struggle] in Białystok. She worked in the “Anarkhiya” print shop. In 1905 she was arrested along with B. Engelson^[2] and E. Maizelis. On February 12 1907, convicted of working in the print shop and storing explosive materials, she was sentenced to two years of *katorga*. In 1908 she was exiled to a settlement in Chitkanskaya volost, Zabaikalskaya oblast, but in 1908 she escaped from there abroad. Prior to 1917 she lived in France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and America. In 1917 she returned to Russia and joined the Russian Social-Democratic Workers’ Party. Later she belonged to the OPK. In the 1930s she worked as a janitor in the artel “Tsvetmet.” Arrested on February 3 1938, she was sentenced on May 26 1938 by a Special Tribunal of the NKVD to eight years in the camps.



№4: **Roza Grigorevna (Reiza Khaimovna) Maidenberg-Gershkovich** (movement pseudonym: Yelena Bolnichnaya Kishinevskaya) (1882, Kishinev—?). From the family of a white-collar employee. In 1901 she joined the Southern Group of Anarcho-Communists. She took part in preparing and distributing leaflets, maintaining a clandestine apartment, and keeping a stash of literature. In 1904 she became a member of the Odessa Anarcho-Communist Workers’ Group, working in an underground laboratory producing explosive materials and bombs. She married the well known anarchist Lev Lazarovich Gershovich.^[3] She was arrested several times. In August 1905 she joined the anarcho-syndicalist Union of Communists. Arrested again at the end of 1905, she was sentenced by an Odessa mili-

¹ The full name of the social-democratic Bund was the General Union of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia.

² Boris Yakovlevich Engelson (1881-1908), an anarcho-communist from 1902, organized anarchist groups in Białystok, Riga, and Minsk. A tireless propagandist and publisher of anarchist literature, he was arrested twice, and was hanged in 1908 for armed resistance to the police.

³ Lev Lazarevich Gershkovich (1874–1938) was a revolutionary activist from 1899. Originally a member of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers’ Party, he joined the anarcho-communists in 1903. An effective propagandist and militant, he was active in Odessa, where he organized illegal trade unions and set up bomb laboratories. Arrested in December 1905, he served eight years of *katorga* and three years of exile.

tary tribunal to five years of *katorga*. In 1911 she was exiled to Zabaikal, where she lived until 1917. In 1923–1925 she belonged to the OPK. On December 29 1925 she signed the “Letter of the 24”^[4] about severing her relations with anarchism. Her subsequent fate is unknown.



№5: **Yekaterina Ilinichna Erdelevskaya (Khaya Elevna Rubinskaya)** (aka Sh. Fridzon or Fridson) (1877, Yelizavetgrad, Khersonskaya gubernia—?). She was the wife of the well known anarchist K. M. Erdelevsky,^[5] and the sister of Olga I. Taratuta.^[6] In 1903 she belonged to the Makhaevist^[7] group “Union of the Irreconcilables” in Odessa. In April 1904, after the group was destroyed, she tried to rebuild it, then fled to Geneva. At the end of May 1904, she turned up in Yekaterinoslav and helped to organize the local Makhaevist group there. After this organization was destroyed, she moved on again to Odessa, where she joined the Anarcho-Communist Workers’ Group. On January 1 1905 she was arrested during a search of the quarters of Olga Taratuta. She was

⁴ The “Letter of the 24” was a statement by members of the OPK denouncing the “political inconsistency” of the non-Bolshevik groups they had formerly belonged to and expressing unqualified support for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. There were eight former anarcho-communists among the signatories, who actually numbered 30, as six names were added after the original document was released. See **One Hundred Years of Political Katorga, Proceedings of the 2nd All-Union Congress of Political Prisoners, December 26–29, 1925** (Moscow, 1926), pp. 44-45.

⁵ Kopel (Konstantin) Moiseyevich Erdelevsky (1876–1908) began his revolutionary career as a social-democrat in the 1890s. In 1903 he helped to found the “Union of the Irreconcilables” in Odessa (a Makhaevist group – see footnote #7). Arrested in the spring of 1904, he soon escaped and founded a similar group in Yekaterinoslav. In early 1905 he became an anarcho-communist, in fact one of the most important ideologues of the movement in Southern Russia. An advocate of “motiveless” terror directed against the bourgeoisie, he was arrested in 1905 and 1908 but escaped from prison each time. Returning from abroad in 1908, he was trapped by the police in Vinnytsia and, after a siege lasting several hours, took his own life.

⁶ The legendary anarchist Olga Ilinichna Taratuta (1876–1938) was sentenced in 1906 to 17 years of *katorga* for her role in the bombing of the Café Libman in Odessa (her co-conspirators were hanged). She soon escaped, but was arrested again in 1908 and sentenced to 21 years of *katorga*.

⁷ Makhaevism was a doctrine propagated by the Polish revolutionary Jan Wacław Machajski (1866–1926), who regarded socialism as the ideology of the rising intelligentsia and urged the horny-handed proletariat to seize power directly and not allow groups with different class interests to benefit from their conquests. Makhaevist groups appeared in the Russian empire in the early 20th century, but soon gave way to anarcho-communist formations, which had a more fully developed concept of the revolutionary process.

released in April 1905. In February 1906 she joined the fighting group of L. Tarlo.^[8] This group was destroyed in March 1906 and she went into hiding. On March 26 1906 she was arrested in Odessa after offering armed resistance. On May 3 1906 an Odessa military court sentenced her to the death penalty, commuted to 20 years of *katorga*. In November 1911 she was released as a result of an amnesty (she suffered from epilepsy) and sent to the settlement of Kudar, Selenginsky uyezd, Zabaikalskaya oblast. Her subsequent fate is unknown.



№15: **Maria Kirillovna Borodyukova** (1887, Ladyshin, Podolskaya gubernia—?). Her father was a *batrak* [farm labourer] and her mother a manual worker. While a gymnasium student in Kamenets-Podolsk, she got to know some anarchists and joined their

group. She conducted propaganda work among the peasants of various districts of Podolia, and organized strikes of *batraks* and other rural workers. In the autumn of 1905, she was arrested in Odessa. On May 8 1907 she was sentenced by a military court to 10 years of *katorga*. After being released in 1915, she settled in Chita. Soon after 1917 she joined the Bolsheviks. She belonged to the OPK from 1921 to 1935. Her subsequent fate is unknown.

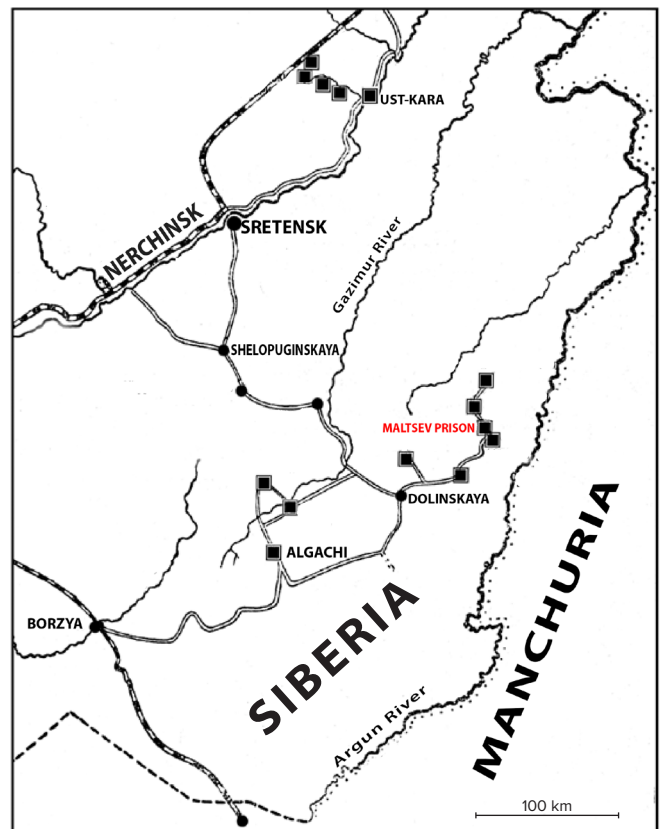


№16: **Nadezhda Yakovlevna (Sura Yankelevna) Derkach** (party pseudonym “Sara”) (December 1883, Snetovka, Letovsky uyezd, Podolskaya gubernia—?). From the petty bourgeoisie, daughter of a white-collar employee. She took midwifery courses in Odessa.

In 1903 she joined the Odessa organization of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers’ Party. In the summer of 1905 she was arrested for taking part in a demonstration. Upon her release in October 1905, she transferred her allegiance to the Odessa Anarcho-Communist Workers’ Group; she participated in expropriations and prepared bombs in an underground laboratory. She also collaborated with the Kiev Anarcho-Communist Group. In January 1906, she attended the Kishinev congress of *chernoznamentsi*.^[9] On

⁸ Lev Itskovich Tarlo (1887–1906) was one of the most famous anarchist terrorists of Ukraine during the revolution of 1905–1907. He led a raid on police headquarters in Odessa in 1906 that resulted in the destruction of part of the police archive. Arrested twice in 1906, he escaped the first time, but received a death sentence the second time from a military field court.

⁹ The *chernoznamentsi*, named after their journal **Chernoye Znamya** (Black Banner), were the most radical Russian anarchist formation at the time of the revolution of 1905–1907. Among their members were those who supported motiveless, i.e., indiscriminate, terror directed against capitalists and state officials.



March 17 1906 she was arrested during an “ex” at the shop of Zaslavsky (Odessa) in which one sales clerk was killed and another wounded. On May 8 1906, an Odessa regional military tribunal sentenced her to the death penalty, which was commuted to life imprisonment at hard labour (*katorga*) on August 27 1906. In 1912 she was released on the recommendation of a medical board and sent to exile in the village of Kudar, Selenginsky uyezd, Zabaikalskaya oblast. She helped to create an anarchist combat organization, and conducted propaganda among soldiers. Upon being arrested again, she served three months in the Verkhneyudinsk prison. While being transferred from the prison to a police station during the investigation of her case, she managed to escape. After hiding successively in Irkutsk, Kiev, and Gomel, she emigrated. Prior to 1917 she lived in Switzerland, Germany, France, and the USA. In 1917 she returned to Russia, and joined the Mensheviks, working in social-democratic organizations in Siberia and Zabaikal. In 1920 she joined the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks). She was chair of the Ispolkom [Executive Committee] and head of the education department in the town of Unecha, Gomelskaya gubernia. Later she was in charge of a club for railway workers in Gomel and worked in the propaganda section of the regional government. In 1925 she moved to Moscow. In 1927–1928 she worked for MOPR [International Red Aid]. She belonged to the OPK in 1925–1935. Her subsequent fate is unknown.



№18: **Paulina Frantsevna Metter** (October 10 1875, Grossezerinskaya volost, Kurliandskaya gubernia—?). She was a worker. In 1902—1905 she worked in the organization of the Latvian Social-Democratic Workers' Party. In 1906 she transferred her allegiance to the Riga anarcho-communist group "International."

Arrested in August 1906 for an armed assault, she was sentenced by a Riga temporary military court to eight years of *katorga*. From 1909 she was part of a "free" convict group at Gorny Zerentui.^[10] In 1913 she was released to live in a village in Zabaikalskaya oblast. In the 1920s she belonged to the OPK. On December 29 1925 she signed the "Letter of the 24" about breaking with anarchism. Her subsequent fate is unknown.



№20: **Sophia Semenovna (Sarra Solomonovna) Novitskaya** (? , Troki, Vilenskaya gubernia—?). In 1907 she belonged to the Peasant Group of Anarcho-Communists. Arrested in December 1907 in Odessa, she was sentenced to *katorga*. Upon the completion of her prison sentence, she was exiled to Posolskaya volost, Selenginsky uyezd, Zabaikalskaya oblast, from which she escaped in 1911. Her subsequent fate is unknown.

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№21: **Austra Khristoforovna Tiavais** (party pseudonym: Liza) (1888, Gryugofskaya volost, Kuplyandskaya gubernia—?). Of peasant origin, she took part in revolutionary circles in 1903—1904 while still in high school. In 1905 she joined the Latvian Social-Democratic Workers' Party. She transferred her allegiance to the Riga Group of Anarcho-Communists "International" in 1906, carrying on propaganda work and taking part in expropriations. Arrested in May 1906, she was sentenced on October 14 1906 by a temporary military court to five years and four months of *katorga*. In 1911 she was released to a settlement in Posolskaya volost, Zabaikalskaya oblast. She escaped in 1912 and emigrated to France, where she lived until 1917. She was a member of the OPK from 1922 to 1935. On December 29 1925 she signed the "Letter of the 24" about breaking with anarchism. Her subsequent fate is unknown.

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№22: **Sura Oizerovna (Stefa Osherovna) Rotkopf** (?—?). A member of the Federative Group of Anarcho-Communists "International" in Warsaw, she was arrested in 1905, subjected to torture by the secret police, and sentenced to *katorga*. Upon being released to live in a settlement, she fled from her Siberian exile, emigrated abroad, and published a series of exposés of the tsarist regime in newspapers in Western Europe. Her subsequent fate is unknown.

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¹⁰ Prisoners who had met certain requirements were allowed to live outside the prison as part of a work group. However, life outside the prison was only marginally better than life inside.



This photo of eight anarchists at Maltsev Prison was taken in 1907, so earlier than the previous photo, but notice the women are wearing almost the same clothes. Back row, left to right: Paulina Metter, Austra Tiavais, Maria Borodyukova, Nadezhda Derkach; front row, left to right: Frida Novik, Yekaterina Erdelevskaya, Sura Rotkopf, Roza Maidenberg. Their average age was 25.

Two of the anarchist prisoners at Maltsev, Nadia Derkach and Paulina Metter, wrote memoirs of their prison experience.^[1] Many such memoirs were published in the USSR in the 1920s and early 1930s, but they must be treated with caution due to censorship (including self-censorship). The recollections of people who had previously belonged to non-Bolshevik parties were especially subject to scrutiny to make sure their view of the past conformed to the official template.^[2] But much of what these two women have to say rings true and their critical comments were probably not objectionable to the Bolsheviks.

All was not sweetness and light in the Maltsev commune. Hunger and extreme weather were a constant threat, and led to serious illnesses among the prisoners. Although the prisoners set aside their political differences, it was not so easy to ignore class differences. The situation of Paulina Metter was particularly distressing. An ethnic German from a region that is now part of Latvia, she did not speak Russian and was practically illiterate. She writes:

“... when we arrived at Maltsev, the group that was already there was living as a commune, which we were absorbed into. But in practice this commune was a closed group, and we, the new arrivals, felt ourselves to be outsiders. I, in particular, felt this keenly since I was the only proletarian among a group of the intelligentsia. In spite of the fact that we were a full-fledged commune and the comrades treated me well, I still felt terribly isolated. Almost all the comrades were engrossed in reading big, thick volumes about the philosophy of Kant, Lavrov, Mikhailovsky, etc. In the prison yard, I mostly walked alone, trailing the group, and tried to explain to myself, firstly, the cause of my isolation, and, secondly, how I would manage to pass the time in this prison—not for days or weeks, but for whole years. I knew about communes from little brochures by Kropotkin and talks in study circles. But we never had a chance to make a commune in freedom. The commune was depressing for me because I couldn’t contribute

¹ N. Ya. Derkach, *Transports and Prisons*, (Moscow, 1930); P. F. Metter, “A Page from the Past,” in *Women’s Katorga. A Collection of Memories*, ed. Vera Figner (Moscow, 1930), pp. 91-109.

² See the discussion in Inna Shtakser, *The Making of Jewish Revolutionaries in the Pale of Settlement. Community and Identity during the Russian Revolution and its Immediate Aftermath, 1905-07*, (Basingstoke, 2014), pp. 17-18.

anything to it. The other comrades received money and parcels while I received nothing because I was separated from my family and comrades by a huge distance and by my lack of knowledge of the Russian language. Only letters in Russian were permitted.”

But Metter persevered, and within a year she was able to speak, read, and write in Russian. Soon she was engaged in an ongoing struggle to save the life of her friend, the SR Maria (Manye) Shkolnik. Medical services at Maltsev were almost non-existent; there was a *feldsher* (paramedic) assigned to the prison, but he didn’t show up on the job for weeks at a time. Shkolnik, like some of the other prisoners, suffered from scurvy, and then developed a serious intestinal illness requiring surgery. There was a men’s prison a few miles away with a doctor, but he was a drunkard who had performed only three operations in his career, two of which ended fatally. After many months, permission was granted to transfer Shkolnik to the nearest hospital (1500 km distant!) in Irkutsk. On the day she left, in a sleigh, the temperature was -40°C. And yet Shkolnik survived this ordeal, and upon recovery actually escaped abroad with the help of comrades.

Nadia Derkach was one of the dreaded *chernoznamentsi*, who terrorized the Russian empire in 1905–1906. She recalled bitterly the execution of her comrades who took part in the Café Libman bombing, especially Beilya Shereshevskaya, the first anarchist to be executed in the Russian empire. Shereshevskaya had been wounded in the stomach while resisting arrest, and bullet fragments had been removed in an operation performed in a prison cell rather than a hospital. Shereshevskaya had recovered somewhat by the time she was hanged; her co-condemned looked on in horror as her death agony at the end of a rope lasted 25 minutes.

Like Metter, Derkach complained of class differences in the Maltsev commune:

“The makeup of our [commune] was diverse, not only with respect to party affiliation, but also with respect to social class. Thus there was a division between uppers and lowers, between aristocrats and plebeians. It was clear that the SRs belonged to the aristocrats The majority of the SRs were from the intelligentsia, and had a solid revolutionary background, while the anarchists were almost 100 percent work-

ers, semi-literate, and politically under-developed.”^[3]

Derkach notes the prisoners suffered from hunger, but

“much more we suffered from the cold. . . . With Siberian frosts of 40 to 45 degrees [below zero], we were in a bad situation. The wind shrieked from all sides; there was snow in the corners of the room, the windows were covered with a thick layer of ice, and water froze on the table. You threw all your clothes on yourself, but you couldn’t get warm. Sometimes at night you couldn’t take it any more and started a fire in the iron stove. Then everyone would crawl out

³ Almost 60 per cent of the anarchists who participated in the 1905--1906 revolution in Russia were teenagers. Many of them became politically active between the ages of 13 and 16.

from under the blankets and be blissfully happy: ‘How nice it is to be warm!’”

Yet Derkach comes away with a positive conclusion:

“Despite all the difficult conditions, the longing for freedom, and the loneliness, I remember the Maltsev prison experience as a period of personal growth. Only in prison was it possible to study, to develop and deepen my knowledge.”

For a recent view of Maltsev Prison’s political prisoners, see

Nadezda Petrusenko, **Creating the Revolutionary Heroines: the Case of Female Terrorists of the PSR (Russia, beginning of the 20th century)**, University of Stockholm dissertation, 2017. Accessible at <https://tinyurl.com/y59dmkc8>.

Biographies of the ten anarchist prisoners are by Sergei Ovsiannikov, who also determined the date of the large group photo. Translation and notes by Malcolm Archibald. Supplementary biographical material in the notes is from the “Kalendar” of Anatoly Dubovik at www.makhno.ru/forum.