

The funeral of P. A. Kropotkin on February 13, 1921, has often been described as the last public manifestation of the anarchist movement in Russia, at least until the final years of the Soviet era. But another funeral took place in 1934 in Moscow that also provided an opportunity for the display of anarchist sympathies. The occasion was the death on January 8 of Mikhail Petrovich Sazhin, born 1845, in his youth a close associate of M. A. Bakunin. Like Bakunin, Sazhin circled the globe taking part in revolutionary adventures before falling into the hands of the tsarist authorities, followed by decades of prison and exile.

In the 1920s – early 1930s, Sazhin was active in the Society of Former Political Convicts and Exiles (OPS). The Society had its own museum in a building in Moscow with a library and archive. Sazhin actually lived in an apartment in the museum building, along with his wife Evgenia Sazhin-Figner and his wife's sister, the famous Narodnik revolutionary Vera Figner.

In his last years, Sazhin was engaged in research on Bakunin and the Russian revolutionary move-

ment of the 1860s – 1870s. Despite the ongoing repression of anarchists in the Soviet Union, he was capable of intimidating the communist scholars who surrounded him. The Marxist philosopher Vladimir Adoratsky once warned a young colleague not to get Sazhin upset because “in Switzerland he could toss opponents off a cliff in a fit of anger.”

At the Third Congress of the OPS in 1928, the octogenarian Sazhin was still spry enough to take on the Marxist Ivan Teodorovich on the significance of the peasantry in the Russian Revolution, and then engage in sharp polemics with the Stalinist hack Emilyan Yaroslavsky.



Mikhail Sazhin as a young man.

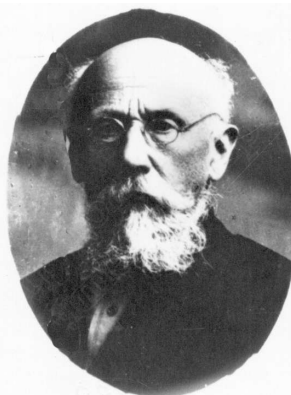
This eye-witness description of Sazhin's funeral was first published in the Russian-American journal *Delo Trouda-Probouzhdenie* (DTP) in 1950. Little is known about the author, A. Alekseyev, who was part of the “third wave” of Russian emigration to the West that took place in the wake of World War II. He wrote a number of articles for DTP about life in the USSR in the 1930s from an anarchist perspective.

The Funeral of Sazhin-Ross^[1]

In one of the Moscow newspapers, *Vechernyaya Moskva* [Evening Moscow], among the notices on the last page, appeared an announcement from the Society of Former Political Convicts and Exiles about the death of M. P. Sazhin. His political biography was set forth below in a few spare lines, which mentioned that “the deceased belonged to the petty-bourgeois anarchist movement and in his youth was the right hand of Bakunin.” And only that! This dry obituary with its hostile tone spoke for itself. The attitude of the newspaper hosting this announcement was crystal clear.

The Bolshevik press could scarcely be silent about Sazhin's death because he was too well known, both among the surviving veterans of the Revolution, as well as among the revolutionary libertari-

an movement in general, as a fighter for freedom and human rights. However, in spite of this nasty smear job by the newspaper, many Muscovites turned up at the civil funeral ceremony to pay their last respects to the famous revolutionary anarchist.



Mikhail Sazhin in old age

The perfidious authorities, fearing that a large crowd would show up, intentionally arranged to hold the ceremony in the small hall of one of the clubs near the Devichy Polye district. And in fact there wasn't room for all the mourners in the hall, and some had to stand in a poorly-lit corridor or on the steps of the entrance staircase.

Upon entering the hall, one was instantly aware of conflicting vibes: on the one hand, the vigilance and overwhelming hostility of the authorities towards the figure lying in the coffin; and on the

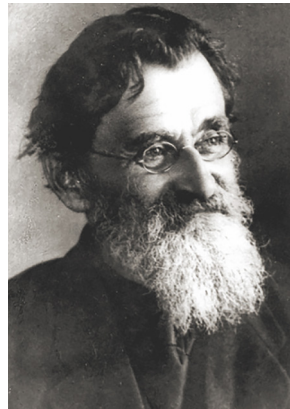
¹ While living in Western countries, Sazhin used the name Armand Ross.

other hand, the authentic grief of the mourners. There was a keenly felt sense that the current ruling power did not share the views of the deceased or those who had suffered along with him throughout his long road of struggle. No, this was a violent, alien power, scattering and destroying many of the deceased's fellow-revolutionaries. As in a malevolent phantasmagoria, or a suffocating nightmare, the minions of the new rulers looked on from the sides and one felt the weight of their bloody hands, which even here, at the coffin of the deceased, represented a menace to us all. It was clear to everyone present that the conditional freedom enjoyed by Mikhail Sazhin was due solely to his truly biblical age.

The simple coffin, covered with red calico, lay on a small stand. Absent was any trace of the work of friendly or thoughtful hands, or perhaps that was just not allowed. There was no greenery, nor flowers, nor wreathes, with the exception of one from the *politkatorzhans* [former political prisoners]. And really, who in the USSR would dare openly lay a wreath at the coffin of an enemy of the Leninist-Stalinist regime? Such an act would be immediately followed by heavy repression. Next to the coffin stood two armed soldiers in the uniform of the NKVD: this was the so-called "honour guard," i.e. a form of mockery over the remains of an anarchist revolutionary who, throughout his entire life, hated these guns and bayonets as symbols of the violence of the state over free individuals. This disgraceful mockery provoked indignation among the assembled friends and admirers of Sazhin.

Especially irritating was the hysterical speech of F. Kon,^[2] official representative of the government, who in a jesuitical-rhetorical vein began to

extol the "fighter for freedom." While expressing sympathy for the "loss," at the same time he hypocritically denigrated the opinions and in fact all of the activities of the deceased, labeling them as "petty-bourgeois." According to Kon, Sazhin's life was not lived in the service of a great popular ideal, but rather as a kind of Don Quixote. This lie, along with the perversions and bayonets at the coffin, were so insulting that a loud exclamation was heard: "Remove the bayonets, the deceased always hated them!" A few other voices were also heard: "Remove the bayonets!"



Feliks Kon

A tense atmosphere prevailed in the hall. The ancient and hard-of-hearing Feliks Kon didn't hear our outcries and continued to read his deceitful speech. Upon the conclusion of the civil ceremony, I had to vanish into the darkness, for I was among those complaining about the government's mockery of this selfless fighter for freedom and it was dangerous for me to accompany the coffin to the cemetery of the Donskoy Monastery, where the cremation and interment of the ashes took place.



David Riazanov

Mikhail Sazhin's end was undoubtedly hastened by his persecution in the press, thanks to Riazanov, director of the Institute of Marx-Engels-Lenin, who accused Sazhin of refusing to hand over for publication any important documents relating to the correspondence of Marx with Bakunin. According to Riazanov, he visited Sazhin several times to talk him into releasing these important historical documents, but Sazhin did not want them published in the Marxist press. Riazanov shamelessly boasted publicly that he was forced to steal these documents, and proceeded to abuse Sazhin, who had to endure these undeserved insults. All this public persecution was a heavy burden to bear in the last

² The Polish communist Feliks Yakovlevich Kon (1864--1941) worked for the Comintern. Described by Lenin in letters as an "old fool," Kon was the only leading Polish communist to survive Stalin's purges. He gained a certain amount of posthumous notoriety when a ship named after him sank in the Sea of Okhotsk in 1996, releasing 1000 tons of fuel oil.

days of Sazhin and undoubtedly hastened the end of this still indomitable old-timer.

The triumph of the Marxist Talmudist Riazanov was brief: he soon ended up in Stalin's bad books and was sent far away with the label "revisionist."³

Such is the value of the human personality in a

country of real slavery and arbitrary violence, where it's not only terrible to live, but also to die.

A. Alekseyev

Delo Trouda-Probouzhdenie, No. 34 (November–December 1950), pp. 22–23.

³ David Borissovich Riazanov (1870–1938) was the leading scholar of Marxism in the early USSR. Before abusing Sazhin, he tried patronizing him: he showed up at Sazhin's 80th birthday celebration in 1925 with a complete set of Marx & Engels as a gift, suggesting that it was not too late for conversion. Riazanov was arrested and sent into exile in 1931, while being accused in the Soviet press of suppressing a letter from Marx to his daughter Jenny criticizing Karl Kautsky. Riazanov's letter defending himself was not published until 1995. He was shot in 1938.



The grave of Mikhail Sazhin: "Veteran of revolution, participant of the Paris Commune."

Translation and notes by Malcolm Archibald.