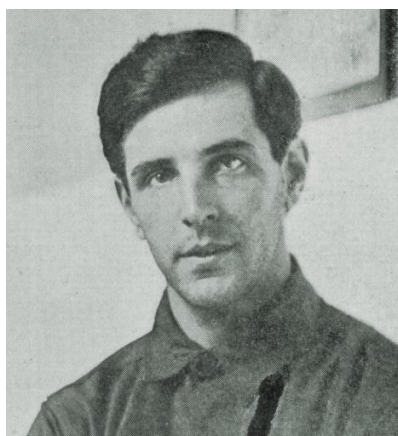


# Peter Bianki: the Soviet years

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By Malcolm Archibald



Once upon a time in America there was an anarcho-syndicalist labour federation with up to 10,000 members. And no, it wasn't the Industrial Workers of the World, which always avoided adopting an explicit political orientation. It was the Union of Russian Workers (URW) (1908–1920) with 60 locals scattered across North America. Superficially there are many similarities between the URW and the IWW; the URW even supplied its members with a little red book for recording dues with a credo which was clearly based in part on the IWW's "preamble to the constitution".<sup>1</sup> But the URW explicitly proposed using "violent Social Revolution" to bring about the annihilation of "all the institutions of the Government and State". Once the State realized what these Russian emigrant workers were up to, the URW was crushed: its facilities were wrecked, and its activists were imprisoned<sup>2</sup> or deported. The URW had a rich, if turbulent, internal history, but little has been published about it so far. The only readily available studies are by the Bureau of Investigation (precursor of the FBI) and the Lusk Committee Report, both notoriously reactionary sources.<sup>3</sup>

One of the leading figures of the URW was the charismatic Peter Bianki (1891–1930), a Russo-Italian emigrant who was among the 249 radicals deported to Russia at the end of 1919 on the *USS Buford*. The memoirs of Bianki's fellow-passenger Alexander Berkman mention him, but his activities after returning to Russia were known to Berkman only in a vague sort of way. This article is an attempt to fill in some of the blanks based on recent research. The discovery of Bianki's three-page application to join the Communist Party in 1924 has provided some new information, although it requires careful interpretation and includes statements which are demonstrably false. For example, Bianki claims to have been in Siberia in 1919 when, in fact, he was

sitting in prison on Ellis Island in New York. In addition to his Party application, researchers in Siberia have discovered details about his violent end in 1930.<sup>4</sup>

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Peter Petrovich Bianki was born in 1891 in Odessa to parents who emigrated there from Venice (the Italian form of their name is Bianchi).<sup>5</sup> The family operated a restaurant and employed hired staff, somewhat embarrassing for Peter when he was applying to join the Communist Party in 1924. His formal education consisted of four years of schooling; he supported himself from the age of 16. On his Party application, he claimed to have taken a 10-month course in agriculture in Amherst, Massachusetts. Indeed there was an agricultural college in Amherst in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with a program for mature, part-time students which Bianki may have taken advantage of. Bianki says he spoke English “badly” and the only language he was fluent in was Russian.

Bianki emigrated to the USA as a teenager, probably in 1907 or 1908. He may have used false papers with the last name “Peters”.<sup>6</sup> Over the next few years he says he was employed as a foundry worker, fitter, mechanic, grinder, cashier, and typesetter, in addition to his “party and social work”. However, one old-timer remembered him only as a window-washer.<sup>7</sup>

Around 1912 Bianki joined the URW. Founded in 1907 with an anarcho-communist orientation, the URW was rapidly making the transition to anarcho-syndicalism, thanks in part to contact with the French General Confederation of Labour (CGT). In 1913 Bianki joined a metalworkers union (he doesn’t say which one), while quickly becoming one of the movers and shakers in the URW. The core of the URW was the weekly newspaper *Golos Truda* [The Voice of Labour] with an editorial staff of well-known anarcho-syndicalists. But when *Golos Truda* was suppressed by the U. S. government in April 1917, the editorial staff packed up and moved to Russia, where publication of the newspaper was resumed in August of the same year. Bianki stayed in the U. S. and was elected general-secretary of the URW, also co-editing its new flagship publication *Khleb i Volya* [Bread and Freedom], “characterised by the extreme violence of its articles” according to the Lusk Committee Report.<sup>8</sup> *Khleb i Volya* managed to publish 38 issues in 1919, despite being raided in August, when Bianki was arrested. This was the fourth time he had been arrested in the USA, where he says he spent a total of 14 months in jail.

On December 21 1919 Bianki was escorted on board the *Buford* for the month-long trip to Russia. Of the 249 passengers, 180 were members of the URW. The deportees were disembarked in Finland, which happened to be in a state of war with the Russian Soviet Republic at the time. A dangerous crossing of the frontier had to be undertaken. After arriving in Petrograd the refugees discovered that the Soviets had initially been willing to accept only three of the refugees: Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, and Peter Bianki.<sup>9</sup>

At an emotional welcoming meeting, Berkman was shocked to hear a discordant note:

“Bianki was speaking, the young Russian of Italian descent. I stood aghast as his words slowly carried comprehension to my mind. “We Anarchists,” he was saying, “are willing to work with the Bolsheviki if they will treat us right. But I warn you that we won’t stand for suppression. If you attempt it, it will mean war between us.””<sup>10</sup>

But rather than distancing himself from the Bolsheviks, Bianki immediately threw himself into all kinds of work for the Soviet Republic. First he went to Omsk to work for the Siberian Revolutionary Committee (the Bolshevik government of Siberia), restoring the transportation system destroyed in the course of the civil war. In May 1920 he was back in Petrograd, working for the Narva-Peterhof District Committee (*Raikom*), a Party organ, where he was the head of two departments. This was an important posting, because the Narva-Peterhof District included the Putilov Works, Russia’s biggest factory. But at the end of December 1920 he moved on to the Petrograd offices of the Comintern (The Third International), where he was in charge of the production of printed materials.

In May 1921 Bianki went to sea as deputy commissar on the diesel-powered hospital ship *Transbalt*. This posting lasted until December of that year and then he spent the whole of 1922 working for the Petrograd-based Northwest Film Company. One of the questions on the Party application asked whether he had ever been the subject of legal proceedings by the Soviet Republic. Bianki answered “no”, but mentioned that he had been interrogated about the *Transbalt* and also about Northwest Film. The *Transbalt* was involved in an international incident in August 1921 which the authorities may have wanted to question Bianki about. The ship, flying a Red Cross flag, put into the German port of Stettin to pick up medical supplies and was detained for several weeks as the local authorities tried, unsuccessfully, to quarantine the crew.<sup>11</sup> Even at this early period in Soviet history, the authorities took a great interest in any time spent abroad by its citizens.

Bianki was unemployed for the first four months of 1923 until he caught on as a commercial director of the state-owned Vienna Brewery in Petrograd (soon to be renamed Leningrad). Founded in 1875 partly by Austrian investors, the Vienna Brewery fell on hard times in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and was turned into a garage for a time. In the early 1920s, the Soviet regime set about restoring the brewery, retaining the old name.

After working at the brewery for a year, Bianki applied, or rather re-applied, for membership in the Communist Party. For according to his application, he had previously been a member of the Party, but had been expelled for six months at the end of 1922, coincident with his leaving Northwest Film. Purges of Party members, intended to weed out people deemed unsuitable for various reasons, were common in the 1920s; it was also common for former members to gain re-admission. Bianki needed recommendations from several current Party members, and the longer they had been in the Party, the better. One of Bianki’s sponsors was particularly valuable in this respect – the Latvian Eduard Zager had been a Party member since 1907.<sup>12</sup> Apparently he was someone Bianki knew from Northwest Film.

Bianki's application was successful, as the collective of Party activists at the brewery voted unanimously to accept him as a candidate member in the second (non-proletarian) category. This meant that he would be on probation for at least one year before being becoming a full member of the Party. But if had admitted to an anarchist past, he would have had to wait at least two years, if indeed he was admitted at all.

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In 1928, at the beginning of the first Soviet Five Year Plan, the Vienna Brewery became part of Zernotrest [literally "Grain Trust"], a vertically-integrated state-owned firm in which food-processing plants like the Vienna Brewery were linked to a far-reaching network of grain-growing sovkhozes [state collective farms]. The Five Year Plan for rapid industrialization was associated with forced collectivization in the countryside; since the Communist Party was chronically weak in the villages, 25,000 "advanced" workers from major urban industrial centres were dispatched to assist in the brutal collectivization process. This was the context in which Bianki left his expectant wife in December 1929 and travelled from Leningrad to the remote Altai region of Siberia to become director of the Charyshky sovkhoz.

The Soviet state's policy of forced collectivization provoked a violent reaction from the peasants. In the last six months of 1929, there were over 600 terrorist acts recorded in Siberia; in the first six months of 1930, over 1,000. In the Altai region, where the peasantry had a history of defending its independence, between August 31 and December 25 1929 there were 16 murders of Party activists and Soviet officials, 28 incidents of attempted murder, 48 cases of arson directed against Soviet institutions, and 31 instances in which "counter-revolutionary" leaflets were distributed. In February – March 1930 the state organs of repression claimed to have uncovered in Siberia 19 organizations of insurgents, and 465 small groups with a total membership of more than 4,000. This widespread unrest, however, did not generally coalesce into armed uprisings.<sup>13</sup>

A notable exception was the uprising which took place in March 1930 in the region where Bianki had just been posted. Known in Soviet historiography as the Dobytsky Mutiny, it is usually regarded by post-Soviet historians as a provocation of the OGPU (secret police) because its eponymous leader, Fedor Dobytyin, was an officer of the OGPU. His recruiting technique certainly aroused suspicions, as it consisted of using his official position to arrest likely rebels, taking them to his home, and persuading them to join his conspiracy. But it is also possible that Dobytyin was a type common enough in Russia's civil wars, namely, an adventurer who was willing to take incredible risks for personal gain, exposing not only himself, but his friends and family, to destruction.

Dobytyin told his prospective followers: "We want equal rights. We can't have a situation where I get 300 rubles while you get only 16, where I can buy whatever I want while you can't even get a decent piece of bread. . . ."<sup>14</sup> He predicted the revolt would spread like wildfire and would take the form of a jacquerie where Communist Party members were massacred.

The revolt was launched in the early morning hours of March 10 1930 in the raion (county) seat of Ust-Pristan. Dobytin's rebels numbered about 50, of whom only 11 had firearms. They seized the militia headquarters with no difficulty and began liquidating Communist Party activists and government officials. Among the first victims was Peter Bianki, who happened to be in the town on business. He must have been armed, because he was killed in a gun fight in the town's market square.

Within a day, Dobytin realized that the revolt was doomed, and abandoned his followers. He also abandoned his father, his two brothers, his wife, and his year-old son to the tender mercies of the OGPU. Dobytin was never heard from again, but his revolt had a certain momentum and attracted several hundred peasants before being suppressed on March 13. In course of the revolt 90 insurgents were killed, and 168 captured and put on trial. Of these, 75 were shot and most of the remainder given long prison terms.

Eleven victims of the revolt, including Bianki, were granted the status of Soviet martyrs and a monument erected in their honour in Ust-Pristan (the monument apparently no longer exists). Bianki's wife, Larisa Vasilevna, gave birth to a daughter while he was in Siberia. He sent word that she was to be named Luiza, in honour of the French anarchist Louise Michel.<sup>15</sup> Luiza Petrovna Bianki (1930–2006) grew up to become a doctor of biological science in the Soviet Union.

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The Siberian village of Charyshskoye (pop. 3,000), like many similar places, still preserves vestiges of Soviet power. There is a street named Kalinin (after the titular head of state during Stalin's rule) and one named Bianki. He is remembered dimly as a martyr to the Soviet cause, but even during the brief period he spent in the region, little was known about his background. It is only in this century that the facts of Peter Bianki's unusual life have begun to be uncovered.



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- <sup>1</sup> The URW has also been confused with Russian-language branches of the IWW unions.
- <sup>2</sup> Some activists received up to 10 years in prison for refusing conscription to fight in World War 1.
- <sup>3</sup> Speer Report: <http://www.marxisthistory.org/history/usa/parties/urw/1919/0408-speer-unionrusworkers.pdf>;  
Lusk Committee Report: <http://www.archive.org/details/cu31924052844218>;  
<http://www.archive.org/details/cu31924052844226>.
- <sup>4</sup> See especially: Dmitry Zakharov, *Dobytinskiy myatezh: sovremennyy vzglyad na sobytiye* [The Dobytinsky mutiny: a contemporary view of the event] (2009): <http://pandia.org/text/78/206/93444.php>. Bianki's 1924 Party application has been published here: <http://www.beercult.ru/profiles/blogs/peterbianki> (blog of Yuriy Katunin). It is a perhaps a symptom of a lack of interest on the part of professional historians that the main sources for this article are a blog from an online "beer archive" and an essay by a high school student. Nevertheless these amateur researchers have made valuable contributions to historical science.
- <sup>5</sup> Anatoliy Pantiukov, *Italyanets na Altaye* [An Italian in the Altai], *Altaiskaia pravda* 2002-09-05 (ALP-No. 232).
- <sup>6</sup> See <http://editorsnotes.org/projects/emma/notes/96/>.
- <sup>7</sup> Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America*. (Princeton, 1995), p. 367.
- <sup>8</sup> Lusk Committee Report (Albany, 1920), p. 862.
- <sup>9</sup> I. Lapin, *Khanko-Beloostrov: istoriya odnogo puteshestviya* [Hangö to Beloostrov: the story of one journey] (2009), accessed at [http://terijoki.spb.ru/history/templ.php?page=us\\_anarhisty](http://terijoki.spb.ru/history/templ.php?page=us_anarhisty).
- <sup>10</sup> Alexander Berkman, *The Bolshevik Myth* (New York, 1925), p. 30.
- <sup>11</sup> The official Soviet protest about the incident can be read here: <http://dockconf.ru/5122.html>.
- <sup>12</sup> Eduard Karpovich Zager (1889–1938) was a skilled worker (welder). Like so many Old Bolsheviks, he was shot in 1938 – in his case, for being a former agent of the Okrana (tsarist secret police) and for corresponding with relatives in Latvia.
- <sup>13</sup> Zakharov, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
- <sup>14</sup> A. I. Kobelev, *Lzhesotrudnik OGPU: Pravda o Dobytinskom vosstanii* [The Phony OGPU Official: the Truth about the Dobytinsky uprising], in *Svet I teni* [Light and shadows] (Barnaul, 2009), pp. 129–144.
- <sup>15</sup> The Communard Louise Michel (1830–1905) enjoyed the status of a "positive hero", someone to be emulated, in the USSR, despite being patronized for her anarchist views.